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THE MAN OF THE WORLD

WORKS BY THE SAME
AUTHOR

I

THE SAINT

Crown 8vo, 6/-

II

THE PATRIOT

Crown 8vo, 6/-

LONDON: HODDER AND STOUGHTON

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THE MAN OF THE WORLD

By

ANTONIO FOGAZZARO

Translated from the Italian by
M. PRICHARD-AGNETTI

Tr of Piccolo mondo moderno

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Introductory Note

FIVE years were allowed to elapse between the publication of *The Patriot* (1896) and of *The Man of the World* (1901), which came as a second link in the chain to which Fogazzaro added the third in 1905, *The Saint.*

During those five years the author published a book of verse, and one of essays; delivered lectures in many different places, and wrote numberless articles for newspapers and reviews; but notwithstanding these manifold occupations he devoted much time to moulding and shaping the characters, to studying and arranging the incidents that were to form the work in which he has shown us the son of Franco and Luisa Maironi in all the strength and heat of early manhood.

Fogazzaro, who finds in J. Le Conte's "Evolution and its Relation to Religious Thought" only a confirmation and an expansion of doctrines which his own poetic instincts have long since made dear to him, cannot fail to be a stanch believer in the influences of heredity, and thus, after his loving but relentless dissection of the souls of Franco and Luisa in *The Patriot*, he leads us on to a no less loving and relentless dissection of the soul of their son Piero, in *The Man of the World.*

The gentle and affectionate Franco, whose strength lay in his firm faith alone, and the passionate, rebellious Luisa, whose grief at the loss of her baby child drove her to the verge of madness, renew their struggle in their son's nature, and while unbelief and passion are raging within him, thrusting ascetic virtue aside, his own innate purity and the "fierce honesty" of the mother, whose face he never knew, are ever struggling to hold him in check.

There can be no doubt as to the author's own opinion of his hero's mental condition, but it is characteristic of Fogazzaro's perfect sincerity, that he gives us the opinion, on this point, of a specialist for mental diseases, who declares Maironi to be suffering from a religious mania. Be that as it may, when we lose sight of him on the shores of Lake Lugano, we are fully prepared to find him again in Benedetto, and if anything could enhance our affection and reverence for that saintly figure, it would certainly be the knowledge of his sufferings and temptations, of his weaknesses and virtues, of the warring within him of sensuality and asceticism, which *The Man of the World* has given us.

Beside Piero stands Jeanne, poor, weak, lovable and adoring Jeanne, whose "soul would be sublime could she give to the Creator the love she has bestowed upon a creature." She and her brother, the shallow but delightful Carlino, are legitimate products of the atmosphere in which they were born and bred, and the "smart" people they call about them are in sharp and striking contrast with the narrow-minded, straight-laced provincials who figure at Jeanne's reception at beautiful Villa Diedo.

Many whimsical and humorous touches enliven the book, and the minor characters are admirably sustained.

Marchesa Nene, whose housewifely thrift is at once so ludicrous and so petty, rises to great heights of fortitude and self-abnegation when sorrow knocks at her door, and again when she endeavours to hide the misdemeanours of her ambitious and not over-scrupulous husband, the worthy Zaneto.

Don Giuseppe Flores—drawn from Don Giuseppe Fogazzaro, the author's uncle—is a model priest, gentle and forgiving; and his interview with the poor, afflicted, inarticulate Marchesa in the garden of Villa Flores is one of the most beautiful and affecting pages Fogazzaro has penned.

The scene of the present story is laid in one of the smaller towns in the province of Venice. The events described take place in the eighties, and thus the author is enabled to give us some account of the intriguing and scheming of modern political parties, as well as of the mode of life and line of thought of the provincial aristocracy, who possess much religious fervour of a narrow, superstitious sort, resort to much pinching and managing in private, and make a great display of ill-fitting, shabby liveries, and of bright-coloured, showy escutcheons in public.

The marvellous descriptions of nature which adorn all of this author's works are not wanting in *The Man of the World.* Vena di Fonte Alta, Villa Diedo, the monastery on the hill-side, and his beloved Valsolda are all dwelt upon with delight, and described with poetic fervour and masterly eloquence.

Fogazzaro, like St. Francis of Assisi, sees a soul in all things, in the blade of grass and in the mountain, in the rays of the sun and in the lowering storm-cloud, and he feels himself one with all the creations of the great Creator. Few Italians have loved and described nature for herself alone, have felt their hearts beat in true unison with her. Many have used her, indeed, but too often simply as a setting, a background, as it were, for human figures. Even the Divine Poet himself never entirely lost his personal attitude when describing nature, and although Petrarch did at times allow her to play upon the chords of his heart, his followers had little or no feeling for her. To find the true nature-lover in Italian literature we must look to the moderns, and among those to whom she utters her sweetest, her purest and strongest thoughts is Antonio Fogazzaro.

MARY PRICHARD-AGNETTI.

BORDIGHERA.

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CHAPTER I

CONCERNING AN EGG

I

THE aged Marchesa Nene Scremin, a frown on her face and arrayed in her reception dress, was dusting her drawing-room herself. She rubbed the backs of the chairs with her handkerchief, rubbed the carving of the sofa and the armchairs, the shelves of the étagères in the corners, and the globe over the clock. One by one she raised the gilt candlesticks from the black marble mantelshelf; one by one she raised from the white marble table the vases, the photograph-stands, the bonbonières and other knick-knacks which had accumulated in consequence of a fabulously long series of birthdays and anniversaries; she polished the marble, and brushed away the little clouds of dust, grumbling the while at that miserable Federico who only made a pretext of dusting. Poor Federico, misshapen, rather bald and almost entirely toothless, came in just at that moment in his working blouse, to say that the old gardener, the one who had been dismissed two months before, was outside and wished to speak to her.

"Tell him to wait," said the Marchesa. "And what are you about, I should like to know, that you have not dressed yourself? Don't you know it is Tuesday? You pretend to have dusted here, do you? Don't you see what a pig-sty this room is?"

"Pig-sty indeed!" said Federico in amazement. "Pig-sty indeed! At any rate I spent two hours here this morning."

"Well, you must have been asleep then! Have you taken Tonina her egg?"

Tonina was an invalid housemaid whom the Scremins maintained out of charity. Federico declared that he did not know whether they had taken her the habitual egg at noon, and at this point the cook appeared to repeat the gardener's message. Notwithstanding the presence of their mistress the two servants had a lively dispute about this uncalled for repetition. But the Marchesa, filled with dark forebodings, wished to know about the egg, and was informed by the cook that the scullery-maid had carried it to Tonina, but that Tonina was not feeling well, and had not eaten it. This was the beginning of a drama! What then had become of the egg? Silence! Was it possible that some one had eaten it? That some one had forgotten it was Lent?

Federico muttered: "It is surely in the kitchen."

The Marchesa stuffed her dirty handkerchief into her pocket and went straight to the kitchen. She searched here, she searched there, but no egg could she find. She looked out of the window and called to the coachman who was cleaning harnesses in the courtyard. While he was on his way upstairs she went to the head of the dark and narrow back-stairway, intending to call the scullery-maid, and seeing some one in the shadow, thought it must be the coachman, and asked sharply:

"Did you take an egg?"

"Do you mean me, Signora?" the person replied timidly. "I don't know anything about any eggs!"

The Marchesa concluded that this was a beggar, and flung out sharply: "There is nothing for you!" Then the person explained that he was the former gardener. "Oh, very well, wait." And the old dame returned to her egg hunt.

No one had taken that egg, neither the scullery-maid, the coachman, nor the housemaid. The Marchesa went to look for the steward, who was in the habit of coming to the kitchen for a cup of coffee soon after noon.

"Have you seen an egg?"

"An egg, Signora?"

The poor steward, who could not deny having seen more than one egg in the course of his existence, but did not dare to say as much at the present moment, simply stared, open-mouthed. Meanwhile on the stairs, in the rooms, in the corridor, in the kitchen, the five servants were muttering insolent soliloquies, and the missing egg filled the house.

"And all for an egg!" grumbled the coachman, greatly put out at having been made to climb so many stairs for nothing. "And they keep horses and carriages, the skinflints!"

At that moment his mistress summoned him again. She wished to know if he had seen his master. He answered very roughly that he had not.

"The master is probably at the Cathedral," said the housemaid, who was standing behind the Marchesa. "He has probably gone there for the hour's adoration."

The old lady was well aware that in consideration of certain political ambitions her husband had not for some time donned the surplice of the members of the Confraternity of the Cathedral, but she remained silent.

Just then a small boy came out of the stable with an armful of hay.

"Ho, there!" shouted the Marchesa angrily. "Where is that hay going?"

This time the coachman answered with a great show of solemnity, for he was glad of this opportunity of silencing her, and, at the same time, of giving expression to his secret contempt for some one else.

"It is the young master's hay. It is going by special order of the young master."

Federico, who was buttoning his livery, muttered another soliloquy concerning the young master's following of ragamuffins. The "young master," the son-in-law of the "old masters," occupied one wing of the palace and kept a saddle-horse in the stables. Even the needy cab-drivers had now begun to sponge on him, and he was giving the hay away. Federico advised the gardener not to wait, but to return towards four o'clock, when the young master would be coming home.

"You see the mistress has got an egg in her head, and to-morrow it may be a whole chicken. Talk to the young master. Now that they have made him town councillor it is just the right moment."

* * * * *

The arrival of the first callers interrupted the Marchesa's investigations just as they were about to lead to a most unexpected and embarrassing discovery. She still maintained social intercourse with the whole town, and her note-book contained a list of ninety-seven calls, which must be paid in December and April, these being the residue of a list of one hundred and forty-six calls, the number she had reached in her youth, in compliance with her husband's wish, and again, perhaps, in those years of fatigue and anxiety, when she had felt obliged to exhibit her daughter. Her Tuesday receptions were, however, usually very small gatherings, because both her intimate friends and her humble friends avoided that solemn day. But on this special Tuesday, partly because it was the Marchesa's birthday, partly by chance, many people came. The humble friends came early that they might not meet the grand friends. They were three or four little old women, stiff and decorous in the dignity of their ceremonious manners and their silks, and in the consciousness of their modest gentility. The familiar "thou" which they used with Marchesa Nene held a hidden and touching spirit of respect and secret satisfaction. The Marchesa got along with these friends better than with the others, for, as regards religious practices, abstinences and fasts, they all, like herself, had consciences of the whiteness of ermine, so white indeed that the smallest drop of milk would have stained them. In their conversation these old ladies had always so carefully avoided any allusion to politics, elections, or Communal Councils, as well as to any other subject unconnected with the weather, with the health, interests and family affairs of some one, or, at the most, with the genius and lungs of some preacher, they had all so invariably lapsed into silence, with the same imposing dignity, when others mentioned either politics or questions of doubtful morality, that now they did not know how to congratulate the mother-in-law upon her son-in-law's nomination as town councillor, which had taken place two days before.

After they had all lamented, in the same voice, that really most fortunate fall in the temperature, which had served to revive a languishing conversation in most of the drawing-rooms of the town, the bravest among them risked a gentle hint.

"I am told your son-in-law has had a great honour conferred upon him! Poor fellow! How good he is!"

The other little old women cooed in their cracked and unctuous voices: "Indeed he is!—So good!—Every one says so!—How glad we all are!"

Marchesa Nene assumed a serious expression, and said: "'Tis but poor comfort, after all." Then from her friends there came a few sad and mysterious words of sympathy and hope, which were allowed to pass unheeded. Presently the conversation returned to the son-in-law's virtues, and instead of addressing the Marchesa the good dames, moved by a refinement of adulation, discussed these virtues among themselves. One had heard the parish priest at the Cathedral praise Signor Maroni's piety to the skies; another told how her maid met Maroni every day at the early Mass. The most timid of all contented herself with correcting the others in an undertone when they mispronounced the hero's name, but for all her murmured "Maironis," they continued to call him "Maroni," and there was indeed some excuse for them, because the Marchesa herself, who was in the habit of remodelling both christian and surnames to suit the dialect, said "Maroni" three times out of four. Then the conversation turned to the marriage of the clerk at the haberdasher's shop where all these ladies purchased their needles and thread.

* * * * *

Later, when the shabby callers had left, some ladies and a couple of cavaliers arrived almost simultaneously. They had made an appointment to meet there, in order to relieve the tedium of this visit to an old woman who did not lead a sufficiently worldly life to permit of their discussing the doings of Dame Fashion with her, nor one sufficiently retired to justify them in dropping her entirely. The same music as before was played over again, but this time in a different key. They discussed the cold weather, and the ladies and their cavaliers alluded to a picnic, to an important question of diplomacy, to certain persons whose presence was not desired by the rest of the company. The bare idea of an early morning stage-drive made several among them shiver, nevertheless they were ready to freeze in silence in consideration of the smart nature of the excursion and of the distinguished company. Presently a lady who was given to dabbling in politics, boldly broached the subject of the elections, while the others were lost in admiration of her eloquence and daring, and one of the cavaliers made some burlesque grimaces. Then he also became loud in his congratulations, which he interlarded with observations uttered in an undertone for the benefit of his neighbours.

"See if Federico does not come in presently with four cups of holy-water!—I am willing to wager anything the Councillor is in his room, shrouded in the cope, and reciting the *Te Deum* before his private altar!—I can hear him now getting up in the Council and intoning, *et cum spiritu tuo*."

His neighbours bit their lips and murmured: "Do be quiet!" while he declared the Marchesa was deaf.

"Ah! ah!" he whispered, when the Prefect was announced. "Ah! now we shall have to talk properly! If I had known he was to be here I would have brought my grammar along!"[1]

The *Commendatore Prefetto*, a good-natured Tuscan who loved a quiet life, had resided in his modest Venetian capital only a month, and having been presented to the Marchesa by her husband in the train, he was now come to pay a first and ceremonious call, and was only too glad of the opportunity to flatter Marchese Zaneto, and to take advantage of his senatorial ambitions, in order to win him away, little by little, from the clerical party. The Marchesa, who was always extremely embarrassed with people who spoke Italian, received him in a manner calculated to greatly embarrass him also. Fortunately the eloquent lady had met the Commendatore several times at the house of mutual friends in Florence. She immediately announced this circumstance, spoke familiarly with him, and, another lady being seated between herself and the Prefect, she introduced her in an undertone, to show that she was aware the mistress of the house should have done this, but that she was only taking a friendly liberty.

"We had better tell Nene her presence here is unnecessary, and that she can go and weigh out the butter in the kitchen," said the satirical cavalier softly to his neighbour.

In fact the poor Marchesa, whose strict domestic economy was well known, was listening in silence to the brilliant duet that was going on between her friend and the Commendatore, who, in that first moment of confusion, had eagerly grasped the only hand that was extended to him. Of course he did not breathe a word concerning Maironi's election by the clerical party, but, not knowing what to say to her, complimented the Marchesa on her beautiful fifteenth century palace, and was informed by her that the late Professor Canella had also greatly admired it. At that moment the facetious cavalier and the eloquent lady rose to go, and the Prefect also took his departure, without waiting to inquire who "the deuce" the illustrious Canella might have been.

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[1] It must be remembered that previous to the arrival of the Prefect the conversation had been carried on in dialect.—*Translator's Note.*

Outside, the deserted street was sparkling in the March sunshine. The restless lady, instead of entering her carriage, carried her two companions off for a walk under the horse-chestnuts of the public promenade, which were already sprinkled profusely with green. The Prefect inquired respectfully if she were a cousin of the Scremins. Upon being informed that she was not, he turned to the cavalier.

"Then perhaps you are?" said he. 'No, you are not? That is indeed strange!"

After one month's residence in this tiny principality of his he had come to the conclusion that all the nobles were "at least cousins, by Jove!" With terror he pictured to himself their connexions and relationships as a hopeless tangle, an enormous, matted skein which would immediately draw into a hard knot if a single thread were pulled. For this reason he never ventured to speak to one nobleman of another without infinite caution and ceremony. He was anxious to ascertain the true value of this clerical councillor, this son-in-law without a wife, of this mother-in-law without a daughter. He was totally unacquainted with Maironi, had not even met him anywhere when calling. And why, *Dio bono!* does this invisible man live in the house with this speechless woman, he wondered.

Both the lady who dabbled in politics and the witty cavalier were extremely well informed concerning the Scremins, and even concerning all their servants, from the famous Federico, who had been dismissed by the Bishop on account of a certain fascinating female who dealt in poultry, down to the scullery-maid, who was cousin to that handsome Matilde of Casa X. who was such a favourite with her master! They knew how much the old Marchesa spent every month for sugar and coffee, and how fabulously long the Marchese's socks were. They could have furnished the Prefect with a complete biography of the new councillor, with a portrait in which not a single hair would have been missing. Perhaps they might have omitted certain hidden shadows in the eyes which their intellect was not capable of perceiving, and which were of very slight importance to the provincial administration. But neither dared enlighten the Prefect in the presence of the other, who would have hastened to publish the fact to the world. It must also be admitted that although they were neither related to nor intimate with the Scremins, they nevertheless felt bound by a common tie of cast to those nobles of an ancient race; therefore the Prefect's somewhat disrespectful tone had troubled them, and they had felt, as it were, the recoil of that blow aimed at the aristocratic establishment, from whence, although they feigned indifference, they in reality derived no small amount of secret and intense satisfaction. The sprightly nobleman might ridicule the Scremins in private, as he did later on when he had succeeded in worming the little story of the egg out of Federico, but in public it was quite another matter, and whenever he met Marchesa Nene's carriage he would salute as solemnly and as respectfully as if a member of the Holy Family were passing. Thus the Prefect had to content himself with the information that Piero Maironi was the fruit of the ill-assorted union of Franco Maironi, a Brescian nobleman, with a person who was his social inferior. Left an orphan in his infancy, he had been Marchese Scremin's ward, and was, moreover, related to him through a Marchesa Scremin long since dead, who had married a Maironi, and who was the young man's great-grandmother. Piero had married the Scremins' only daughter, who had unfortunately fallen a victim to a serious mental disorder soon after her marriage, and had now for four years been languishing in a hopeless state in an insane asylum. Her husband was inconsolable, never went into society, lived a life of retirement, was most regular in his attendance at church, and studied a great deal. He was extremely wealthy, having inherited a large fortune from his great-grandmother. He was wealthier than the Scremins, but did not attend to his affairs, and gave largely in charity.

Finally the cavalier and the lady drove off in the *coupé* which had been following them, and the poor Prefect would indeed have felt most uncomfortable could he have heard the witty gallant comment gracefully upon the form of his hat, which he called a perfect model of the Pantheon, and pronounce his voluminous cravat " a most suitable collar for a Government carthorse." As to Maironi, neither the cavalier nor the lady could abide him, and having served the Prefect, they fell upon the new councillor, whom they termed a surly creature, a hypocrite, a boor, an eccentric, secretly ambitious fellow, who probably knew where to place his charities that they might bear good fruit. The cavalier even went so far as to express a doubt of the saintliness of a young man who had been married and still not married for four years. Poor cavalier, poor lady! They also would have felt most uncomfortable could they have heard the words in which Captain Reggini, of the Nizza cavalry, who was a famous cynic, addressed the Prefect, his compatriot, under the horse-chestnuts, not two minutes after the carriage had driven away.

"Now will you tell me, my good Commendatore, what you were doing between that old frump and her swain? Don't you know that your presence has prevented the mingling of their souls?"

* * * * *

II

Marchesa Nene did not find herself alone with her husband and safe from domestic curiosity until very late in the afternoon, only a few minutes before the evening reception would begin.

"The egg?" said he, very humbly, when his wife questioned him with a darkly frowning face. "Don't talk about it! I myself took it! Indeed I did! I know I was a fool, but you needn't eat me! I was a fool, that is all I have to say."

In his outburst of virtuous humility he offered to make public confession in the kitchen.

"Nonsense!" grumbled his wife with knitted brows.

Her husband, who was much her superior in culture and much her inferior in soul, cherished many ambitions of which she was ignorant, and was skilful in treading certain unstable ways among the clouds, and certain other subterranean passages, helical galleries these, which might perhaps lead him by easy stages with his load of desires and scruples, to some lofty mountain-top ; but he had never been able to learn to tread the common ways skilfully, the ways in which the vulgar herd walks swiftly ; indeed he was even incapable of steering a straight course in his own house, where his wife stepped about so briskly. She, on the other hand, whose nature was a most complicated mingling of acuteness and dullness, of generosity and parsimony, of romantic kindliness and almost harsh firmness, who had come into the world without imagination, without passions, without egotism, was ever inconsiderate of self, but still always clung tenaciously, either openly or covertly, to her own wishes. She was quick to say unpleasant things frankly, but was a jealous custodian of her own innermost thoughts, and possessed a keen sense of the poor reality with which she had surrounded not only the undying strength of her gloomy and deep affections, but her wise designs and her vapid speeches as well.

She was devoted to her husband as the only man to whom she had ever given a thought ; she was devoted to his happiness, which, in the ethical field, corresponded less to his own wishes than to her sentiments. Zaneto's incapacity in all practical matters was a source of secret irritation to her, nor would the acquisition of a certain celebrity as an archæologist, the much longed for seat in the Senate, or even a ministerial portfolio, have sufficed to banish that subtle sense of contempt which had now prompted her to exclaim : nonsense ! For the rest of the evening a shade of dissatisfaction rested upon her brow, although from time to time the old man would attempt to offer her certain delicate attentions, and the conversation of the assembled friends—priests and middle-class people, all hangers-on of this noble family—was more animated than usual.

* * * * *

The Casa Scremin drawing-room was a sort of laboratory where, every evening, words picked up in other houses or on the street were brought for analysis and dissection ; words with which the proprietors might sometimes be identified, or floating, ownerless words ; every rumour, indeed, from which an interesting fact, or a spicy suspicion concerning some one might be pressed, any dark matter was welcome from which, by means of the proper chemical agents, the wavering outline of an intrigue might be evoked, or in which there lurked the scent of some well known person, who might then be followed on his secret way, and, if possible, stung or even bitten ever so slightly, just enough to bring out the flavour, or at least to allow of the gathering up of a few of those exceeding fine threads which form that delicate web of comedy life is continually weaving, brushing aside and refashioning again around every human being. The laboratory was well supplied both with salts and acids. Discreet and decorous scandal was concocted there concerning all the sins of humanity save that of passion. The sins of passion were strictly excluded from the conversation. If the two or three more outspoken members of the assembly ever ventured to infringe this rule, Marchese Zaneto would at once raise his voice, and exclaim : " Tut, tut, tut ! " and it seldom happened that the persistence of a rebel forced him to add hastily and in a still louder tone: "Tut-tut, tut-tut, tut-tut!" This good man, who would certainly have been tempted to join the Pharisees in stoning the woman taken in adultery, was rigorous to the same degree in other matters only when unorthodox sentiments in questions of faith were concerned. When the discussion dealt neither with immorality nor dogma he never interfered. Cautious himself in every word he uttered, the fact that others were less so seemed gratifying to him. All these natures possessed a certain quantity of common salt. There was a retired judge of a crabbed disposition, who was always ready with Epsom Salts, and a tall, lank, yellow, and frowning old man, who was a regular visitor and was always accompanied by his tall, lank, yellow and melancholy wife, and who never spoke without scattering a few drops of acid.

That night the crucible of the Casa Scremin chemists contained the flower of the world of fashion, the very Olympus of the little town. To subject that Olympus to the action of acids and salts gave them the greatest possible delight. These honest, middle-class mongrels had little respect for the formidable beast that sprawled upon the escutcheon of the house of Scremin. Marchesa Nene herself did not appear to hold the beast in any great consideration, and Marchese Zaneto, who was affable and meek with all, skilfully concealed the affection with which he did indeed regard it. The noble couple belonged to a gloomy, heavy, melancholy group of reactionary nobles, between whom and the Olympus of brilliant receptions, balls, picnics, lawn-tennis and skating, the relations were strained and cold.

A jovial priest, who was extremely inquisitive and an eager tale-bearer, had no sooner entered the room than he imparted a delicious bit of news.

"So there is to be no picnic after all!"

The sour man and the salty man, who always joyously seized an opportunity to attack the priest, at once exclaimed:

"That is stale news! Stale news! You are too late, too late!"

The priest, astonished, vexed and very red, maintained that the resolution to give up the project had been formed only three hours before, at six o'clock, upon which his persevering tormentors retorted that the matter had been discussed at the café at half-past six, and that the idea of a picnic had been abandoned on account of the strangers at Villa Diedo.

"That proves you know nothing about it!" the priest cried exultingly. He had another version of the story, "and it is the true version," he declared. An amphibious gentlewoman, all church in the morning and all Olympus in the evening, had told the tale to her husband in the presence of the family physician, which physician, being a friend of the priest, and having run across him soon afterwards, had said to him: "Are you going to Casa Scremin to-night? Then tell this piece of news there." And the priest began his story solemnly, and in choice language.

"You must know that out of respect for the Lenten season some of the ladies had made it a condition that the picnic should take place on a Sunday."

"I don't believe that nonsense!" grumbled the sour man.

The others said "Hush!" and the priest retorted in dialect:

"You needn't if you don't want to!" and then at once mounted his Italian pulpit again, a pulpit which was indeed somewhat disjointed and rather slippery.

"Well they chose Sunday—next Sunday. Meanwhile it happened that Pittimèla, you know who he is, met the Zigiottis, husband and wife, while out walking, and—fool that he is—invited them to the picnic! Just fancy the Zigiottis! Of course they were delighted, delighted! The news spread rapidly, and the storm broke. Every one was opposed to the Zigiottis' coming, especially the ladies. They bestowed a long string of titles upon Pittimèla, but what was to be done? The patrons and managers of the picnic inquired of one another—'What is to be done?' One of the ladies said: 'We must give Pittimèla to understand that as he has cooked this dish he must eat it himself, and find a means of relieving us.' A second said: 'We must drop Pittimèla also!' Another said: 'We must drop the whole thing!' A fourth said nothing, but promptly fell ill."

"Excellent!" exclaimed the bitter man. "We can easily guess who that was!"

"A certain lady——" said the acid man.

"I know nothing about it," the priest declared.

"My good fellow, as if every one was not aware that her husband and that Zigiotti woman——"

"Tut, tut, tut!" piped Marchese Zaneto hastily. "Go on, Don Serafino." And the priest continued.

"The patrons were in despair, and did not know which way to turn. However, this morning everything seemed to have been arranged satisfactorily, for at three o'clock a deputation went to Villa Diedo to invite the Dessails."

"The Dessalles!" some one corrected.

"Well, well! *de sal, de pevere,* salt or pepper, or whatever it is."

At mention of the Dessalles—the strangers of Villa Diedo—the sour man who had designated them as guilty of having brought about the catastrophe and had been contradicted by the priest, began to draw his mouth, his nose and all the muscles of his wizened face into the most doleful and fantastic grimaces. Don Serafino glanced at him, and before he had time to open his mouth, said: "You wait!"

"I was not going to say anything, confound it!"

The priest continued:

"As ill-luck would have it the Dessalles were expecting friends from Venice on Sunday."

"What did I tell you? What did I tell you?" grumbled the man who had not been going to say anything.

While Don Serafino was relating how, owing to the Dessalles' refusal, opinions had become divided as to whether the picnic should or should not take place, the sour man and the bitter man kept interrupting him in tones that grew ever louder: "What did I tell you? What did I tell you?" while a few more "what did I tell yous?" burst forth in more subdued tones here and there among the audience.

For a time the priest struggled on, but finally being quite out of patience ended by saying mildly: "*Pazienza!* Patience! Patience!" Then descending from his Italian pulpit, he roared in dialect:

"Bless my soul! Can't you let me have my say?"

"Hush, hush! Be calm, be calm!" cried Zaneto.

But when the priest, as red as a lobster, barked out that they knew nothing at all about it, that the Dessalles' refusal had once more brought up the discussion concerning the Zigiottis, that it was on account of that Zigiotti woman that they had "pulled and haggled until the whole thing had fallen through," then the others barked out in reply that if the Dessalles had not refused, the Zigiotti question would never have been brought forward again, and they all barked so loudly that Zaneto gave the rudder a great jerk, and turned the conversation towards the nose of Signor Carlino Dessalle.

"I have only seen him once, but what a monstrous nose!"

"Don't criticise it, Marchese!" the sour man exclaimed. "Everything must be perfect at Casa Dessalle, even the noses. Strangers, Marchese, people who entertain, people who spend money, my dear sir! Let us worship them, let us flatter them, let us pet them, let us go into raptures and ecstasies! How distinguished they are, how amiable, how kind! What wit, what beauty is theirs! You, Marchese, criticise his nose, but I am willing to wager that here they are ready to admire even *her* nose!"

"*Peuh!*" ejaculated Don Serafino, as if he thought this second nose had, after all, very little that was hideous about it.

"It is indeed so, my friend! Listen to him, Marchese! Even the clergy! Even the clergy are losing their heads in this matter, in spite of the fact that these people do not go to Mass! They are people without religion, the sort we call *pamòis* hereabouts!"

This word *pamoio*, which, in the local dialect, is used to designate both a sort of broth and a person of doubtful orthodoxy, perhaps because of the weak and colourless aspect and the scanty nourishment contained in such a broth and in such a creed, caused another outburst of indignation.

"What are you talking about? What do I care if they are *pamòi* or not? What has *pamòi* got to do with noses anyway?" shouted the priest.

The bilious censor roared: "Yes, sir! Yes, sir! *Pamòis* I say! He and she both!"

The bystanders were laughing and urging them on. Zaneto, half amused and half annoyed at the failure of his stratagem, was trying to pacify them. While the fray was going on a highly obsequious gentleman, seated beside the Marchesa, inquired her opinion of the matter in an undertone. The Marchesa, who was knitting, replied without raising her eyes from her needles: "I am not going to worry myself about it."

Indeed the old lady never worried herself about anything that was none of her business. At least this was apparently the case, for at the very bottom of her nature there were many secret and tightly closed cells, where she kept all the notes she had silently made concerning many things which, at the time, she had not seemed to heed, together with the intricate threads of shadowy plans for the good of this or that person in some future and ill-defined circumstance; all the likes and dislikes to which she had never confessed; her judgments of men and things, which, though hidden, were as hard and inflexible as bronze; her opinions, of which some were logical and others distorted, and which from time to time would lend unexpected colouring to her more intimate conversation, a colouring that had nothing in common with those hackneyed phrases with which her tongue was well supplied. She was, moreover, much out of sorts that night, and Marchese Zaneto, his conscience still dripping with the forbidden egg he had thoughtlessly appropriated in the kitchen, seized the opportunity, while the others were too deeply engrossed in their quarrel over the Dessalles' noses to notice, of approaching his spouse and making certain contrite grimaces, which only served to irritate her still more.

"There, there! Let me alone, do!" said she sharply. "Don't be foolish!"

The poor man turned with a crestfallen air to Don Serafino, who was warmly answering one who had interrupted him.

"Abraham? What in the world is he dragging Abraham into it for?"

"Yes, indeed," the other retorted, "Not Abraham and Rebecca, but Sarah! That is how it is."

As the Dessalles had proclaimed themselves brother and sister this was a delicate insinuation that perhaps some Pharaoh might have told a different tale about their relationship. Several voices protested. Both in Rome and Venice the Dessalles were well known as brother and sister; they were the orphans of a very wealthy banker of Marseilles who had married a Guglielmucci of Rome. Don Serafino declared that whether they were *pamòis* or not it was nevertheless a fact that they had invited their parish priest to dinner, and that they gave him large sums for the poor. The lady had, moreover, offered him something for the church.

"Of course, she is a saint!" muttered the sour man with a smile full of hidden meanings.

"After all, we don't know anything about her," Don Serafino exclaimed.

"*You* don't know anything about her!" the other retorted, but stopped here, for fear of Zaneto's "tut, tut, tut!"

"And to think she must be at least thirty!" the bitter one murmured as a sort of epilogue to unspoken words.

At that a brisk fire of exclamations burst forth on all sides. "Thirty, indeed! Thirty, indeed!" "Twenty-five!" "Twenty-two!"

Then the sour man rallied to the side of the bitter individual.

"Yes, yes! Not more than eleven, or perhaps only ten!"

* * * * *

When the clock struck eleven the entire company poured out of the drawing-room upon the stairs. In the vestibule of the palace they began to speculate in whispers upon the Marchesa's gloomy looks. What "the deuce" could be the matter? Hardly had the bevy of guests reached the street when they were joined by an intimate friend of the family, who had loitered on the stairs with Federico for the purpose of worming the secret of the long face out of him. He now came running towards the others, chuckling behind his turned up coat collar, rubbing his hands and repeating to himself: "Splendid, splendid, splendid!" In a flash they had surrounded him, and then all feasted delightedly upon the famous egg, all echoed his: "Splendid! Splendid!" all, that is, save Don Serafino, who, as this was a very delicate matter, only laughed discreetly and muttered: "Poor woman! Poor woman!" in a tone of gentle commiseration. After the Marchesa's long face it was the turn of the lamp. "What a smell of petroleum! It was really shameful!" "And the coffee!" Don Serafino cried.

"Was it not simply dirty water to-night?" All the friends echoed this sentiment save the sour man, who maintained that it had been *pure* water!

The priest told how, in former days, he had once complained to Federico, but Federico had excused himself by accusing his mistress. "It is her sordid avarice, sir," he had said. Every month, after paying the grocer's bill, the mistress would repair to the kitchen and lecture the servants about the coffee, that was always too strong. Having thus shown their gratitude for the hospitality of Casa Scremin, where these humble burghers had for many years revelled in an odour and a flavour of mastery over the noble house which was extremely flattering to their democratic senses, the company broke up beneath a street-lamp, situated where several ways met, and its members quickly dispersed down three or four deserted streets. On one hand the sour man had returned to the Dessalle question, and was holding forth with all the harshness of indignant virtue, uttering things which might well have horrified four Zanetos, and made even the venerable metopes gazing down into the street from Palladino's cornices, exclaim: "Tut, tut, tut!" On the other hand the egg was being beaten up once more with whisperings and subdued laughter, and once more Zaneto's withdrawal from the Confraternity of the Cathedral was commented upon. Then they performed an autopsy upon their old friend in search of the *ulcus senatorium*, while the bitter man kept repeating: "Worldliness! Worldliness! They are all alike!"

"By Jove!" cried another, "an egg in the forenoon during Lent! I shouldn't be surprised if he turned Turk next!"

Then certain promises Zaneto had made to the deputy of the borough were brought forward for discussion. Just fancy! Zaneto, who had never been to the polls since 1870! They also alluded to steps the same deputy had taken on the Marchese's behalf to obtain the support of a Roman gentlewoman, who was on terms of intimacy with two ministers.

"Do you hear that?" somebody said. "On terms of intimacy with two! Fancy what a virtuous gentlewoman she must be! I should think he would have to cry 'tut, tut, tut!'"

A certain local potentate was mentioned in discreet language, a politician autonomastically called: the under-sized Commendatore.

"Yes, but if that little chap does not help him——"

Down a third lane Don Serafino was trotting towards his humble nest in company of one who had built his nest in the same locality. These two were also diligently beating up the egg, but they did so with much gentleness. They were imagining Zaneto's remorse at having given such great scandal. "For indeed he is a truly holy man!" said the priest. "I know that for a fact." And then he related to his friend acts of self-denial which Marchese Scremin had performed in secret. It was true his desire to become a Senator was always gnawing at his heart like a worm, and, certainly, it was a most baneful worm. In low tones Don Serafino was minutely examining this ambition and its unfortunate results, when, at the corner of a street, his companion interrupted him by a touch of his elbow. In turning the corner he had brushed against a gentleman who, lost in thought, was going in the opposite direction, walking slowly with his hands in his overcoat pockets.

"Did you see the Councillor?" he inquired when they had gone on a few steps.

"No. Which Councillor?" Don Serafino asked.

"Why, Maironi, of course."

"Maironi! At this hour? In this part of the town? Where can he have been? He is never seen at the receptions any more. Many think he has grown more absent-minded and melancholy than ever. He goes to Mass every morning, to the evening service every night, and to the Sacraments once a week. He always was pious, but never before to such an extent. And as to charity—his charities are endless! I know that for a fact. Of course he has had a great sorrow, but, after all, that is nothing new. It all happened four years ago."

"No, it cannot be that. He is a fine young fellow, but there is no denying he is eccentric. Blood is thicker than water, after all, and they say his mother was hot-headed, and as to his father . . . *héhéoli!* But his virtues are great, nevertheless. A real saint, indeed. Such faith, such charity! And then such devotion to the cause! He is an honest, thoroughgoing clerical, you see, for, *inter nos*, there are plenty of wire-pullers in our party. There are those who are always straining after the money-bags, and those who simply want to create a sensation, to make a name for themselves and acquire power. Such are few in number, but, unfortunately, they exist. He is not that sort, no indeed. And how talented he is! So extremely talented!"—Here Don Serafino suddenly stopped short, took out his snuff-box, and dipping two fingers into the snuff, said with an air of great importance: "I must tell you we are about to make him mayor!"

III

Meanwhile the absent-minded gentleman was walking wearily towards Palazzo Scremin. He found the great front-door closed, and the gas had been put out in the vestibule and on the stairs. He entered his own apartment on the first floor, opposite the one occupied by the Scremins. He was removing his overcoat in the anteroom when some one knocked softly at the door. He opened it. There stood the Marchesa Nene's young maid, a tall, slender, light-complexioned girl, clad in a dark dress, her hair falling in curls on her forehead. He turned pale, and, still holding the door-handle, inquired what she wanted. The girl, who was also pale, fixed her fine blue eyes upon him, eyes in which, behind a veil of tenderness, there lurked a certain boldness.

"One moment," said she, "I have a message." She threw a rapid glance over her shoulder, and repeated: "I have something to tell you."

Her voice, though slightly hoarse and thick, was nevertheless musical.

The young man hesitated a moment, then murmured: "Come in," and drew aside.

As the little maid brushed past him he was conscious of that warm perfume that emanates from the hair of the young, and from a wholesome body, and he heard her whisper a "Thank you" laden with meaning as she took his overcoat, hung it up with slow movements, and smoothed it with light touches of her hands, which, though not white, were small and slender. The little lamp that was burning on the *consolle* opposite the cloak-stand, gilded her magnificent hair, which was twisted in her neck like a knot of serpents.

"The gardener has been here," said she, still caressing the overcoat and speaking softly, almost tenderly, as if the words had belonged more to the coat and to her caresses than to the listener. "The gardener who left."

For a few moments there was no answer, and her hands seemed to move uncertainly, aimlessly. Then the young man said: "What——" in a voice that was not his own, and did not finish his question. She stooped to pick up who knows what, and, as she did so, he caught the flash of her slender white neck.

"He says," she went on still more softly, "that he may get a position with the Signori Dessalle, and that they will surely ask my Marchesa for a recommendation, and would you perhaps be so kind as to speak a good word for him? He says also that you are to be made mayor, and that he hopes you will remember his son, and get him a place in the library."

She faced about, glanced at the lamp that was smoking, moved very slowly forward on her way to turn it down, and, as she passed Maironi, raised her great eyes to his face. They had a glassy look, and were full of an out-spoken proposal. He shuddered, but said nothing. Very slowly the little fair-haired maid began to lower the wick. It sank steadily lower and lower until the light had almost disappeared. Then Maironi exclaimed sharply:

"The Signora is ringing for you!"

"She is ringing?" the girl started, raised the wick, looked the young man in the face, and saw at once that she had gone too far.

"If the man returns," Maironi went on, "you can tell him I will give the desired recommendation."

"Very well," said the girl sharply, and walked away, stiff and serious, without so much as a salutation or a glance.

When he was alone the young man pressed his clenched fists to his temples, then struck them violently upon the top of the *consolle*, letting them rest there a moment while he, panting, stared at himself in the glass as if questioning his own reflection. Then suddenly, as if terrified by his own face, his own expression, his own thoughts, he blew out the lamp with violence, and entered his bedroom in the dark, flinging himself upon his knees in the slanting ray of grey light which the nocturnal sky cast across the rug on the floor, clasping his hands despairingly as he gazed up at the dimly luminous clouds.

After a few seconds he gradually lowered his eyes to the window-sill, to the shadow, and they became fixed as though beholding a vision. His will power suspended, neither acquiescing in nor resisting these imaginings, he seemed to be beholding things that took his breath away. He roused himself, flung himself forward, pressing his face against the floor. Presently he started to his feet, lighted a candle, and, baring his right arm, held it several times above the flame, his fist tightly clenched. Then he looked at the great red burns, heaved a sigh of relief, took out his portfolio, opened it, and fell to studying a small, oval photograph it contained. It was the portrait of a young girl of about eighteen, whose features were regular, but whose face wore a cold expression, although the eyes were not devoid of a certain gentle melancholy, and there were unmistakable signs of firmness about the chin. The hair dressed very high, as had been the fashion five or six years before, spoilt the face, which seemed to be looking out from beneath an awkward circumflex accent, and suggested some one who was dead. The young man carried the portrait to his lips, but, filled with a sense of his unworthiness, had not the heart to kiss it, and laying the portfolio down on the pedestal with a sigh, he noticed for the first time a little bunch of violets resting upon a letter.

His thoughts flew to the Tuscan maid. Perhaps it was she who had written, who had offered the flowers. Neither eagerly nor reluctantly he stretched out his hand, lifted the violets from the letter, and then paused, his hand still raised, overwhelmed with bitter shame.

It was not a letter, but a card, which bore only two words in Marchesa Nene's hand:

"MARCH 17."

Piero Maironi and Elisa Scremin, who had given him the portfolio, had become engaged on the seventeenth of March, 1882, and every year Marchesa Nene had thus delicately, poetically and silently reminded her son-in-law of that once happy day which had now become a day of mourning. Now for the first time the seventeenth of March had passed, and he had not remembered. Not even the violets had reminded him of it. Good God! And he had thought they were from the maid! Mentally he begged the venerable old lady to forgive him, but his ardour was soon lost in the heavy sense of discouragement that rose from the depths of his soul. He lay down without praying, torn by conflicting, shapeless sentiments; he was ashamed of his weakness; distressed because he could derive no comfort from his material victory over temptation ; he had a dull sense of anger against the Almighty, who was silent ; he was tortured by doubts as to whether his struggle against nature be not useless and foolish, as to whether he be not, after all, merely a poor blind slave of those moral and religious prejudices which had been stamped by others upon the tender conscience of his childhood, and from which he might never be able to escape. These doubts filled him with terror and remorse, and were followed by a fine determination to fight bravely on. Then, when these turbulent emotions of the soul had become more calm, and drowsiness had begun to creep over him, there arose once more, in the inner darkness of his mind, a vision that banished sleep, and grew ever more vivid ; a vision of the woman with the glassy, eloquent, burning eyes, who had offered herself. He drove the voluptuous picture from him, then evoked it once more only to repulse it again, this time more weakly than before. His heart was beating violently, and he felt as if a thick, soft veil were spreading itself slowly above him, shutting out heaven. He was conscious of a sense of liberation, of intoxication which seemed to rise from the hot earth, of self-surrender, of an amorous ecstasy in which all his innermost being, a magnificent, untried fund of passion, of joy, of folly, seemed to burst forth from his heart, his thoughts, his senses. Varying forms flashed across his inner vision ; the bold, fair-haired lady's-maid, beautiful Signora Dessalle, with her great, dark eyes which had gazed at him so intently one day when he had met her in the train ; and still other forms appeared, which he violently moulded into one shape, into one being, creating them himself with irresistible might, and by the power of an imaginary, a magic kiss, pressed passionately between ear and neck; creating thus out of the servant as out of the lady, the woman of his desires, and animating with his own flame this being which was come out of himself, and was destined to be reabsorbed into himself. Suddenly he sat up in bed. In the silence of the night, in the tremulous light of the candle, even the familiar objects about him seemed to be watching him in amazement. He rose, opened the window, and drank in the cold, dark and silent air.

The clock on the city tower is striking: one, two. Silence. The clock of the neighbouring church is striking: one, two. They sound like sad and weary voices, exchanging a melancholy, monastic greeting: *memento.* Other solemn voices, some far away, others near at hand, several in the house itself repeat: one, two: *memento.* Mechanically Maironi made the sign of the cross and murmured:

"*Et ne nos inducas in tentationem, sed libera nos a malo, amen.*"

He heard the prayer's echoless fall into the dull and empty mystery, and, folding his hands, he called out almost by blind instinct, to two beings he had never known, whom he had pictured to himself in an infinite number of shapes, whom he had sometimes forgotten, sometimes longed for intensely, beings bound to him by the most tender affection, but powerless to answer his call, for they were sleeping their last sleep in the poor little churchyard of Oria in Valsolda: "Mother! Father!"

He remembered that he had an important letter to write and determined to set about it at once. It was a letter to Monsignore De Antoni, canon of the cathedral, who had called upon him the day before with a secret mission from His Excellency the Bishop. The clerical majority in the council, which was the result of the recent elections, would, it appeared, be in danger of death if it did not succeed in giving birth to the young mayor it had conceived. This reluctant fruit of its womb was Piero Maironi. Steps taken to persuade him before the election had not led to satisfactory results; Maironi would not hear of accepting, and had declared as much to Monsignore De Antoni. The meek Monsignore had interlarded his protests with a series of viscous exclamations, such as: "Well, well! Yes, Sir! Yes, Sir!" He had also resorted to fleeting smiles, grimaces and bland assurances, such as: "I see your point! I see your point!" adding quickly: "It shall be done! It shall be done!" and had thus obtained a postponement of the final decision. Now Maironi was anxious to be quit of the whole matter. If he had allowed his friends to nominate him it had been simply because he felt he owed this to his party, and also because he had an undefined longing for excitement and work, but in consideration of his ignorance of a mayor's duties, he did not wish to be placed at the head of the communal administration at a difficult moment, when his inexperience might cost his party very dear, and the public still dearer. He was, moreover, reluctant to thus suddenly lay aside the cloak of gloom which had enveloped his life for four years. Perhaps also, some other element in his friends' offer was repugnant to him, though this he would not confess even to himself. So he had come home that night fully determined to write at once, and put an end to the matter.

While he pondered, pen in hand, upon the language in which to clothe his arguments that they might prove sufficiently convincing to the Bishop, to whom Monsignore De Antoni would doubtless show his letter; while he was casting about for the words best adapted to explaining the difficulties, the dangers the cares and anxieties that would beset him should he accept the mayor's chair, a new thought flashed across his mind. And what if he did accept? What if the difficulties, the dangers, the cares and anxieties should serve to banish these amorous and voluptuous phantoms which were besieging his soul? What if this thought had been inspired by the father and mother he had but now invoked? What if God be secretly stretching out His hand to him through his friends' offer and the Bishop's insistence? He thought and thought until his head became quite confused with weariness and sleepiness, and he finally postponed his decision until the next morning.

* * * * *

He was still sleeping when Marchese Zaneto cautiously entered his room, his face full of regret and his mouth of excuses. He explained that it was very necessary for him to speak with his son-in-law, and that, knowing his habits as he did, he had not reflected that he might still be asleep. He would, however, consult him at once, if he should not be disturbing his son-in-law too much. Since his political success his father-in-law had treated him with a dignified and cold civility that was most irritating to Piero, and he was always on the alert to discover the hidden cause of this. Having listened to Zaneto's preamble, he said to himself:

"Now we shall see!" but he answered aloud: "Not in the least!"

"Very well, then," Zaneto began slowly, his eyes fixed on the ground, and he stroked his cheeks several times with his left hand as if to squeeze out the words that fell stickily from his lips. "Two points."

Having thus opened the conversation he raised his eyes, not, however, to his son-in-law's face, and began to speak more fluently.

"Several members of your party have called upon me. I say your party because my views are perhaps ——well, perhaps not quite——! Be that as it may, these people wished to come to an understanding with me. Very worthy men they are, I must say, and men of authority. They desired me to persuade you to accept the office of mayor. I told them that I could only repeat to you what they had said. They declare——"

Here Zaneto's voice underwent a change; he affected the measured accents of one who repeats the words of another, and wishes it to be understood that the sentiments he is voicing are not his own.

"They declare that both your social position and the result of the elections point to you as the most available person; that no other mayor but you would be possible; that if you should not accept it would be a public calamity, and so forth and so on!"

Zaneto was silent for a moment, then finally glancing at his son-in-law, he added feebly:

"That is all."

"And what do you yourself think?" Piero inquired.

Zaneto frowned slightly, assumed the expression of an embarrassed Sibyl, and, after a prolonged silence, answered in an unusually decided tone:

"Pray do not press me!"

"That will not do!" said the young man ironically, for he was bound to get to the bottom of this diplomacy. "Why should I not press you?"

Zaneto made a sweeping, silent gesture, raised his right arm on high, and smiling as if to say: "To what purpose?" once more repeated:

"Pray do not press me."

"Is it so hard to say outright that you do not approve?" Piero exclaimed.

"No," Zaneto replied. "I neither approve nor disapprove. I wish you to know at once that some one else has spoken to me on this subject, begging me to dissuade you, but I requested that person, as I now request you, not to press me."

"And who may that person have been?"

Zaneto started and writhed, uttering a rumbling sound of protest that seemed to emanate from the depths of his being. His son-in-law was quick to guess.

"The Prefect!" said he. "There is no doubt about it!"

"Steady! Steady!" cried the disconcerted Zaneto. "I have named no one, nor do I intend to do so. However, many people came yesterday to speak to me about your appointment. The first person came at eight o'clock in the morning—an individual who was a stranger to me. 'Who are you?' said I. 'I play the bassoon in *fa bemolle*,' he replied. 'Well, and what do you want?' 'If you would only speak a good word for me to your son-in-law, who is going to be our mayor——he might perhaps get me a place in the town band——' At noon another person appeared. He also wanted your support. He wished you to get his son into the post-office and his mother into the workhouse. A third petitioner turned up last night. He declared that within a few days you would be mayor, and that he should then wish to call upon you to pay you his respects and lay before you certain private requests of his own at the same time, but his wardrobe being in a most deplorable condition, would you kindly make him a present of a decent coat? You can judge for yourself from these specimens what sort of a following you will have."

Piero gazed fixedly and silently at him, reading his very soul, and, having read, he changed the subject.

"There was something, else, I believe," said he.

The Marchese pretended to find it difficult to suppress an outburst of fictitious mirth.

"Yes, something else," said he. "Something else *sicut ed in quantum!*"

And he proceeded to set forth the other matter, though not without being shaken, from time to time, by inward laughter.

Another ambassador of the same stamp as those who had come with the scarf of office in their pockets, had knocked far more timidly and secretly at Zaneto's door, with the intention of gaining his support, and of extorting money from his son-in-law for the clerical newspaper. Zaneto gave the message with the same touches of humour with which, a moment before, he had delicately flavoured the requests of the other petitioners, adding salt to the already bitter dish, in the hope of rendering it entirely unpalatable, and this not so much from paternal anxiety concerning the money that was menaced, as from the desire that that journal which, of all others, was the one most obnoxious at the Prefecture, might not receive aid from a member of his family.

"And now I have done my part," said the elderly diplomatist, rising.

Maironi concluded that the interview was at an end, but he was mistaken. His father-in-law came to the bedside and took his hand, saying in an undertone, the expression of his face completely changed: "Tell me——" He now restrained his sobs with the same difficulty with which he had previously restrained his mirth, but finally succeeded in uttering the words: "When are you going?"

"As usual," Piero answered, also in an undertone. "The day after to-morrow."

"Do you expect to see her?"

"Why, no. You know the director has not allowed me to see her for some time."

Then Zaneto began to weep still more violently. Maironi knew the old man was deeply attached to his daughter, who was a prisoner in an abode of suffering; he knew that these tears could not be called hypocritical. Nevertheless his own manner of feeling and of expressing grief was so different that these noisy and violent demonstrations of Zaneto's irritated his nerves much as the amiability of *Süra* Peppina had in former days irritated his father. The blood that now rushed to his face was indeed the honest, impetuous blood of poor Franco.

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Zaneto, wiping his eyes on a big handkerchief that was none too white.

"What is it?" said Piero with a shudder. "What is the matter now?"

"Oh, a great trial! A great trial! I must make a tremendous sacrifice!"

Then followed more sobs and more tears; a painful search through all his pockets for the big handkerchief; a tossing about of the sheets which was most annoying to Piero; and the final discovery of the filthy rag under the chair, when his eyes were already dry, and Zaneto had no excuse for a fresh outburst of grief.

"There is no help for it! I must speak out! You are aware that the date upon which you are entitled to claim the marriage portion of——"

There was a pause; his face twitched, but finally his will triumphed.

"The time is up next year. The matter must therefore be discussed. I will not attempt to hide from you that in my present position the payment of such a large sum——"

Piero interrupted him. What was he worrying himself about? Never mind the date and the payment! He might arrange everything to suit himself. Hereupon the worthy Zaneto embarked upon a sea of confused words, and would certainly never have reached the shore again had not help arrived in time. As a matter of fact this request for a postponement of the payment of the marriage portion, was simply a prelude, an introduction, as it were, to a proposal to shift the income tax to his son-in-law's shoulders for the future. Piero immediately perceived that the poor man was only reciting, awkwardly enough, a little lesson that had originated, and been developed and arranged within that cold and hard bump of affairs, that flourished in the friendly society of other bumps of a totally different nature, beneath the grey tresses of Marchesa Nene.

"Do just as you like!" he exclaimed angrily.

"Don't be impatient! Pray don't be impatient!" said poor Zaneto. "These matters must of course be discussed."

He pulled out his watch, started, and exclaimed: "Oh! Oh!" and hastened away, explaining that he had promised to accompany Nene to the Cathedral for the nine days' devotion to St. Joseph.

After Zaneto had left Piero remained for a long time lost in thought and contemplation of the deep impression his heavy father-in-law had left in the easy chair; of the scandalous and shameful rents, destitute of diplomatic drapery, destitute of all those studied arrangements which Zaneto was wont to affect when seeking to produce an impression upon others with a different part of himself, with the superior and more respectable part. Then Piero dressed himself, and wrote the following letter to Monsignore De Antoni:

"MONSIGNORE,—

> "Will you kindly inform Monsignore the Bishop that, should my colleagues really see fit to summon me to fill a certain office, I shall accept, notwithstanding my scanty qualifications and my total inexperience of public business. Tell him also that I rely greatly on his prayers. I beg you also, Monsignore, to commend me to the Almighty.
>
> "Your most obedient,
> "P. MAIRONI."

He re-read his note and asked himself: "In how far am I sincere? In how far am I hypocritical?"

Presently Federico came in with a letter. "It is sure to be from some one who plays the bassoon in *mi*," thought Piero. He saw at once, however, that he was mistaken. The envelope was of parchment paper, delicately scented with violet, and bore only these words:—"Signor Maironi"—written in a bold and firm hand. Who had brought it? A footman belonging to the strangers at Villa Diedo.

Piero opened the note and read as follows:

"SIGNORE,—

"A certain Pomato has applied to us for a position as gardener, and has informed us that he was for a long time in your employ. My brother being absent, I take the liberty of begging you in his name to give us what information you can concerning this man's capability and honesty.

"With sincere apologies for troubling you with this matter,

"I am, yours very truly,
"JEANNE DESSALLE."

"PS.—I am at home on Mondays and Fridays from five to seven o'clock."

Federico inquired if there was an answer. Maironi was silent, absorbed in contemplation of the two discreet and eloquent lines of the postscript. Two months before he had travelled in the same compartment with a young lady of most distinguished appearance, with very pronounced but fine features, and great, intelligent, soft eyes, that had met his own too often, and had remained in his heart for days afterwards. The lady had left the train when he did, and in the footman who came forward to take her bag he had recognized a former servant of Casa Scremin, who had now taken service with the Dessalles. Once more those great, intelligent, soft eyes had opened in his heart.

"An answer?" said he, still gazing at the postscript. "No, not now." And then when Federico had already left the room, he called him back, saying: "Wait. There is an answer." And he wrote:

"SIGNORA,—

"It is true that Pomato was in the employ of my father-in-law, Marchese Scremin. I believe he is a skilful gardener. I have heard that he professes socialistic opinions. I am not aware that the Scremins ever doubted his honesty.

"Believe me, Signora,
"Yours very faithfully,
"P. MAIRONI."

He handed the note to Federico without re-reading it, and dismissed the poor fellow sharply: "There! Begone!" as if he feared to have time to repent.

CHAPTER II

IN THE MONASTERY

I

A MAN-SERVANT of the old school ushered the gentleman who had inquired for Don Giuseppe into the billiard-room.

"Your name, please?" said he.

"Maironi."

The servant went in search of his master.

The glass door that, by means of five steps, leads from the billiard-room to the garden of Villa Flores, stood open. The weak, April sun was languishing upon the grey cover of the billiard-table and upon the light deal floor. The warm air wafted in the faint odour of the fine rain that could be seen trembling in the sunshine, and that was veiling the distant landscape beneath the blue sky. The sloping field that stretches away in front of the lofty and isolated building, the great trees that seem drawn up in line in expectation of the passage of a procession of princes, were drinking in the sweet, gentle rain without a whisper. The empty house was equally silent. In the room itself the chairs standing against the walls, the few other pieces of furniture systematically arranged, the covered billiard-table, were like so many sad, dead things, that still retained the memory of life.

The servant had not yet returned. Piero went out to the steps to watch the gentle and silent rain, and a faint odour of violets recalled to him the voluptuous vision of the being who now filled his heart. He saw her slowly opening her fur-cloak, saw the exquisite lines of her figure, and once more inhaled the perfume of violets, for she had worn a small bunch of those dark flowers in her belt. He felt the intelligent gaze that had then sent a pang through his breast, once more penetrating him, slowly invading his whole being. "I cannot find him, sir," the old servant was saying behind him. "He is neither in his room nor in the chapel. Perhaps he is out on the hillside." And he added that he would go in search of his master. Maironi would not allow this, and himself started towards the low hill that rises behind the courtyard of the villa, sloping gently on the south side, where it is striped with rows of grape-vines, through which a procession of thin cypresses cuts upward, but steep and wooded on the western slope, and laced across by strange, looping paths which seem to bind it together and prevent its falling. Piero saw the elderly priest he was in search of coming towards him down one of these paths. Don Giuseppe Flores, the last of his line, was sole master of the lonely villa, of the hill, of the low-lying fields where, in the deep silence of noon, turkeys gobbled and ducks and geese quacked, of the clustering groups of foreign and common trees, which, on that side, rose upwards through the narrow glades and along the ridges of the hill, until they met the topmost row of vines growing high up on the other slope.

Don Giuseppe was descending with slow steps, reading the while, and heedless of the light and infrequent drops of rain. When he raised his eyes from his book Maironi saluted him, and hastened forward. At first the old priest did not recognize him, but presently he uttered a joyous: "Oh!" and started downwards with youthful vivacity, his arms spread wide, grasping his hat in one hand and the book in the other, while his face shone with astonishment and pleasure. His was indeed a noble face, in which the manly lines of the lower half, and the great arch of the nose formed, as it were, a worthy completive to the lofty language of the broad and solemn brow, while the dark, animated, gently stern eyes, ever ready to assume the hue of the mind's every flash, every flame, every shadow, told of a warm, inward purity, of the hidden sweetness of that majestic language. Now those eyes were indeed sparkling, for Don Giuseppe had known Franco and Luisa, Piero's parents, in Valsolda, where he had been visiting some relatives of his before 1859, and he was always delighted to meet Piero, who reminded him of those two choice spirits, of the lonely and poetic lake, and of the most peaceful days of his life. They seldom met. Don Giuseppe was nearing seventy, was alone in the world, and absent from the city nine months of the year; he had, at one time, been Marchesa Nene's confessor and a frequent visitor at Casa Scremin, but he seldom went there now. He met Piero from time to time during the winter at the reading-rooms, or outside the town-walls, on the lonely hill-side paths.

"My dear *Signor Sindaco!* My dear Mayor!" he cried gaily, placing his hands affectionately upon the arms of the young man who stood before him in a respectful attitude, smiling also. "What a miracle! How has this come about?"

"You have always been so kind to me, have so often urged me to come, that to-day I remembered your invitation. I had a reason for remembering it."

"Well done, well done!" said Don Giuseppe, and it struck him that they wanted something of him at the town-hall, that they wished perhaps to lay the burden of some public office upon him. In silence he turned towards the villa with his guest, already planning excuses and a line of defence, for he was old and weary. Maironi also strode along, preoccupied and silent. Don Giuseppe was the first to feel the weight of this silence, and inquired for news of the Scremins. Presently he halted, and looked at Piero with an innocently mischievous smile.

"Is it true," he said, "what they have been telling me about the Marchese?"

"What have you heard?"

"That he is soon to be made senator."

Piero shrugged his shoulders.

"It may be," he replied. "I do not know. I should not, however, be greatly astonished. But tell me—am I inconveniencing you? You may have wished to remain out of doors a little longer."

Don Giuseppe protested, and was more firmly convinced than ever that the Mayor had come with a fixed purpose. Near the gate of the courtyard they were obliged to pause and allow a herd of oxen to pass, on their way to the drinking-troughs.

"Are these some of your subjects?" said Maironi. "I assure you they are a hundred times better than mine!"

His tone was so bitter that Don Giuseppe exclaimed in astonishment:

"Is there some trouble? Are you in trouble at the town-hall?"

"No, no, no!" Maironi replied hastily. "That is of no importance whatsoever. I spoke thoughtlessly."

There was, then, something else that was of importance. Don Giuseppe ushered his guest into the billiard-room, and begged him to be seated.

"Pardon me," said Maironi, still standing. "If you will allow me, I should like to consult you." And as Don Giuseppe, nodding his consent, still urged him to be seated, he looked fixedly at him for a moment without answering.

At last the old priest understood.

"As you like, as you like," said he, and placing a hand on Piero's arm, turned him towards the door that led into his own small, damp and chilly study.

"I must beg you to pardon me," said Maironi, in a low tone.

No, it could not be an official matter. That was not Piero Maironi's usual voice.

"No one will come in here?" he questioned.

Don Giuseppe turned the key in the lock and said:

"There."

He had heard certain rumours to the effect that the Scremins' affairs were in a somewhat unsatisfactory condition. Could it be a communication on this point? Or did it concern the unhappy prisoner? While he was thus casting about in his mind, Piero Maironi sat beside him on the shabby old red sofa, silent and with bowed head.

"Don Giuseppe," he began at last, and stretched out his hand to the venerable priest without turning his face towards him. "I have come to you as a son."

Don Giuseppe took his hand and pressed it, deeply moved, his lips working silently, while a glow of affection overspread his face.

"I feel the same reverence for you that every one feels: yes, yes—let me tell you so! But besides that I cherish an especial affection for you; why, you are well aware. Now I am in the greatest need of your help."

The face of the saintly and humble priest flushed with astonishment.

"You need my help?"

"Yes, I need your help. I have come to you as a son to a father, but to a father who is also a priest."

Don Giuseppe again took his hand, and once more pressed it in silence.

"I warn you not to be surprised at anything. Think that I am the penitent and you the confessor. First of all I must ask you a question: Is it by any manner of means possible, according to the laws of the Church, that a married man whose wife, though still living, has been completely and hopelessly insane for several years, may obtain permission to enter a religious corporation?"

"I am sorry to say it is not."

Maironi was silent.

"He may, however, withdraw from the world," Don Giuseppe hastened to add. "He may dwell with God in solitude; regulate his life according to self-imposed rules, and sanctify himself."

The solemn brow, the serious eyes, the low and gentle voice all breathed respect for the great grief, the great faith that appeared thus united in the young man's desire.

Maironi answered in an undertone: "That would not be possible."

During the silence that followed a forgotten word once spoken by Donna Luisa Rigey, Piero's mother, flashed across Don Giuseppe's mind. The Maironis, the Pasottis and he himself on foot, with Signor Giacomo Puttini on the miller's donkey, were climbing Monte Boglia by way of Castello. Near Muzzaglio Don Franco Maironi had suddenly exclaimed: "Would not this be a beautiful spot for a monastery?" But Donna Luisa had murmured: "Far too beautiful for useless beings!" Then a great discussion had ensued. And now, after so many years—how strange a thing is human destiny!—here was Luisa's son, who at that time was still unborn, experiencing the fascination of the monastery.

"You probably do not understand why it would be impossible for me to withdraw from the world without assuming the religious habit, without taking solemn vows. This is owing to the condition of my soul. You see I really came to speak to you of my soul. I foresaw that concerning that other matter you would answer me as you have done. But, after all, it is so hard to speak to you of my soul! Even I myself do not understand perfectly. If I come to one conclusion about myself, I at once find a reason for believing the contrary. You must help me, Don Giuseppe. You see how I am suffering, and you were fond of my dead father and mother, were you not?"

As he pronounced these last words a wan smile crossed his face, a smile so sad that it pierced Don Giuseppe's heart. "Yes, yes," said he. "I was indeed fond of them." And then he lapsed into silence once more, his natural humility making a last stand, and causing him to hesitate about offering advice and consolation.

"Tell me," he began at last, in a low tone, his face illumined with the light of holy joy: "I gather that this idea of a religious life came to you through grief, but when did it come? How did it begin?"

"Oh, Don Giuseppe! It did not come to me through grief!"

"No?"

Maironi's face, shaken by an inward storm, became distorted. He still held his voice in check, but nevertheless it trembled.

"No, Don Giuseppe, I am a wretch, for I no longer feel any sorrow for my wife's condition."

Don Giuseppe stared at him, more terrified by the distortion of his face than by his words. Piero repeated with laboured breath and in a hoarse voice: "None at all!"

Don Giuseppe spread wide his arms.

"In that case——?" said he almost harshly.

Maironi started to his feet, went to the window and stood there a moment with his back to the priest, who could see his shoulders heave. When he came back to the sofa his face was once more composed and his voice steady.

"I must explain everything to you," said he. "Will you be patient with me, Don Giuseppe?"

The old man silently reassured him, and he continued:

"You know how I came to live at Casa Scremin. You know also that I was left fatherless almost as soon as I was born, for my father died in Oria in 1860, in consequence of his wounds, and I was born in '59.

You are aware that my mother died two years later—also in Oria—and that my great-grandmother Maironi, not wishing to have me in her house, entrusted me to her relatives, the Scremins. The Marchese is the son of a brother of my great-grandmother. She soon died also, appointing me her heir, and placing me under the guardianship of the Marchese. I believe that from that day forth the Scremins thought of me as poor Elisa's future husband. I grew to manhood in their house, studying, as you know, with Don Paolo. I was not free to choose my own friends, associated ever with the same people, and imbibed only one set of ideas. I still love that worthy man, Don Paolo, but, as a boy, I adored him. How often I determined to become a priest like him! The very odour of the incense that clung about Don Paolo's tunic when he came to take me out to walk after service filled me with reverence! And I looked upon the priestly calling as almost a divine state. During the services, when the organ was playing, my greatest delight was to dream of Thebais or Lebanon, or often also of a fantastic monastery lost in the midst of the North Sea. At that same time——"

Here Piero paused.

"Pray consider this as a confession," he said softly, and then continued:

"It seems incredible that I, who dreamt of monasteries and the religious life, should, from my early boyhood, even before the moral sense had developed in me, have been subject to strange attacks of sensuality, a sensuality rendered blind and especially distressing by the ignorance in which—fortunately for me—I long remained. As I had always been deeply religious, I cannot begin to describe to you the terror I experienced and the many secret acts of penance I performed when my moral sense was at last aroused! At one time, after receiving the Sacraments, I was subject to religious ecstasies and indescribable trances, and I had days when the very thought of anything impure was loathsome to me, so that very soon I began to think seriously of entering a religious Order, as the only means of ridding myself of the persecutions of the spirit of impurity. Once I was taken to visit the abbey at Praglia in the Euganeian Hills; you are surely well acquainted with the abbey, it must be some six or seven miles from here. There, in the loggia of the hanging courtyard, the idea came to me of becoming a Benedictine. I was fifteen at the time. I spoke to Don Paolo of my desire, but he told me I was too young to think of such things. From certain vague words of my confessor I inferred that the conversation had been repeated to the family, and that they were much opposed to my desire. In fact, after that they often sent me away on journeys with Don Paolo, and sometimes got a friend to take me to the theatre. I was still often assailed by inward struggles, but, for all that, I held fast to my purpose. I studied Greek and Latin eagerly, and I was thankful that my tutor did not oblige me to follow a regular course of study, because, even before I had thought of becoming a monk, I had been greatly distressed upon learning that the regular course could only lead to my becoming a lawyer, a Government official, a physician, an engineer or a professor. I felt no inclination to follow any of these callings, and I had believed there was another path in life for me, so I grieved over my disappointment much as I grieved at not being able to explain to myself the desires that distressed me. The idea of becoming a religious came as a revelation, and was for some time a great relief; this lasted until I was about sixteen. At sixteen a consciousness of change in myself, a consciousness of viewing everything in a different light, certain glances from women's eyes that were new to me, certain revelations of the world and of life, convulsed my soul. Nevertheless, in those periods of indescribable agitation, even in those moments when the thought of the religious life was abhorrent to me, the idea of rendering that life impossible by marriage filled me with inexplicable terror—yes, it was real terror! Meanwhile I held fast to all the outward forms of religion; to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, to the Association of Catholic Youths, and this by instinct, because here, at least, there was something solid. Years passed, and I should have begun to attend to my affairs, but I thought nothing about them. I saw that my guardian had no wish for me to do so, and it suited me to humour him. I have no love of riches. I was made much of by the clerical party. You are aware of that. They made me vice-president of the Club. They gave me work to do; translations of Catholic writings from German and French. They often talked to me of my talents, of public offices which I should be called to fill, of the important part I should take in the Catholic movement. They enclosed me within their circle, teaching me to regard all young men who were not clericals as corrupt and dangerous, and they frequently suggested marriage to me, with allusions to my little cousin, who was still away at school. What I did for the Club I did with indifference. The only thing I took an interest in was a translation from Ketteler. I felt that I might indeed become enthusiastic over the idea of a Christian-Social Legislation, but at the same time I was aware that between the members of my party and myself there was a great want of agreement on many points, and that really *ex corda*, common action with them would be impossible for me. It seemed to me that only water flowed in their veins—holy-water, perhaps, but very different from that blood, full of smouldering fire, that I felt coursing through my own veins, and I once more lapsed into a sort of lethargy, comforting myself with the idle hope that some unknown power might develop within me. As to marriage, I began to entertain the idea of it much as an exhausted swimmer begins to contemplate giving up the struggle. I was one-and-twenty when the Scremins took Elisa, who was seventeen, out of school. They then gave me a small apartment and a man-servant to myself, the Marchese informing me solemnly that the laws of propriety demanded this arrangement, and he spoke so solemnly that it almost seemed to me they considered me unworthy to aspire to my cousin's hand. I was now apparently free. But, as a matter of fact, the Marchesa, by means of those gentle wiles in which she excels, kept me more a slave than ever. Personally Elisa was pleasing to me ; I admired a certain enigmatic something in her very coldness and reserve, but I liked her, above all, because I saw plainly that she liked me. However, my eyes being at last opened to the manœuvres of both her father and mother, I was much vexed, and stood on the defensive, for I was not really in love. While I was in this state of mind, one night in Venice, I, who up to that time had kept myself materially pure——"

Silence.

"Pass that over! Pass it over!" Don Giuseppe murmured. Piero continued:

"The reaction of shame and loathing was most violent. After that, marriage with a girl so pure and reserved as my cousin appeared to me a refuge of peace. When I married her I believed I was deeply in love. However, not even to her could I relate what my secret intentions had once been. But I remember that on the occasion of a visit to Praglia we made together, the fact of being there in the hanging courtyard with my wife produced an extraordinary impression upon me, and she asked me several times if I was not feeling well. Now, dear Don Giuseppe, I have come to something that is most painful! It seems cowardly to tell certain things when——"

Piero could not continue, could not repress a violent sob.

"Well," he said at last, "after the first few days I began to be greatly disappointed in my wife, and this for several reasons. For one thing, her coldness was unconquerable, notwithstanding her affection. You must forgive me! I may indeed tell a father everything. She no longer seemed to me enigmatical; her nature still remained closed to me, but I believed it contained nothing. I took her to Valsolda to visit the resting place of my dead. I could have wished her to become attached to the town, to the house that is so dear to me. But she exhibited only icy indifference. This wounded me deeply. The terrible disease began with attacks of prostration, seasons of terror, presentiments of evil and heart-rending paroxysms of affection for me. I cannot describe to you the remorse I felt at that time, how I despised and hated myself! I vowed to worship her as a heavenly being should she ever be restored to health. I rebelled against sending her to the asylum, but was forced to yield because the physicians gave me hope of her recovery only on that condition. God only knows what I suffered, and I placed great trust in Him! At the end of a year the doctors, who up to that time had always encouraged me, began to speak doubtfully, gloomily. The shock was terrible, but little by little it passed away. From time to time there were periods of improvement, and this sufficed to sustain hope. Besides, my mother-in-law, poor woman, was so confident! At first she used to speak of her daughter as if she would be well the next day; later she ceased mentioning her, but I was aware that she was preparing a little lodging for her in the country. Just fancy, she even had stoves put up, that the house might be ready to receive her at any season, and she collected there certain pieces of old furniture that Elise had loved as a girl. For two years longer I lived on in this way, continually tossed between hope and disappointment. At last a time came when, in thinking of my wife, I would recall some act of hers, some word that had displeased me. I was terrified. Was it possible that my grief was beginning to diminish? I banished these recollections as diabolical temptations. But they persisted in returning. I struggled with all my strength, praying myself and soliciting the prayers of others more than ever, and even carrying my demonstrations to excess. For instance, I arranged my wife's bedroom and dressing-room exactly as if she were there, with all her knick-knacks, her perfumes, and even her wrapper spread out ready upon her little easy-chair. For a short time this was a relief to me, and served to recall the past, but then—— I could see the look of tenderness in the eyes of my parents-in-law, I could see the look of pity in the eyes of my friends. It was an awful thing, because I no longer suffered, I no longer loved; to my horror I realized that I was a hypocrite. Nor was this all. Before this I had never thought of looking twice at any woman because she was beautiful, but now——"

The young man covered his eyes with his hands, repeating that he was determined to tell everything, everything! Presently he uncovered his face and continued:

"One day—I was in fact returning from the place where my wife is confined—I met a young and beautiful woman in the train. She must have known who I was, for I at once perceived that she was examining me with curiosity and interest. She is the first person who ever suspected the truth about my sentiments, for, after glancing at her two or three times, I seemed to read astonishment and a sort of inward amusement upon her face. For some time I could not banish those eyes from my memory. I became even more assiduous in my ascetic practices, I prayed to God for help, and I finally believed I had indeed forgotten."

Maironi had told the latter part of his story in a broken voice, panting with the effort of tearing out of his soul things that had lain so tightly compressed within it. Don Giuseppe listened to him sadly, with the resigned air of one whom nothing can any longer astonish, who knows he is listening to the same eternal, never-varying tale. Piero continued:

"My ascetic fervour was of short duration. And here I must tell you that it was not while I was staggering under my load of sorrow, but later, when my grief had begun to diminish, just at the time when I was devoting myself most assiduously to religious practices, that I began to be visited by strange thoughts that were quite new to me, by strange doubts concerning religion, which flashed upon me and shook me, and which, though I quickly drove them away, left me trembling. One night my mother-in-law's pretty young maid found a pretext for coming to my room. I controlled myself; my face and my words were cold, and she withdrew; but a moment followed in which I asked myself, if God really wished His creatures to be tortured thus why He did not make His help more adequate. Why had He allowed me to meet that woman in the train and this girl here in my mother-in-law's house? I felt rebellious; a pressing, gnawing question throbbed in my brain: What if God did not exist? What if He did not exist? What if all my faith be but a web of illusions? What if I be but the slave of the prejudices of others, of ideas that had been put into my head when I was too young to think? What if, as regards religion, I be but aping miserably those I had always seen about me? Oh, Don Giuseppe, Don Giuseppe! You must save me, you must save me!"

The young man threw his arms around the old priest's neck, sobbing bitterly. Don Giuseppe returned his embrace and whispered gently:

"Yes, yes, my dear son! Not I, indeed, but the Lord will save you. Yes, yes, confide in Him, confide in Him!"

The servant knocked at the door and announced that coffee was ready. Don Giuseppe saw fit to open the door for him. Maironi regained control of his feelings, and when the servant had left the room went on with his story.

"That very night I determined to accept the office of mayor. At first I had been most reluctant to do so. Since my great misfortune I had been restrained by an instinctive sense of terror every time I had contemplated giving my empty life any fixed direction, or binding myself in any way. I had always felt that God was reserving me for something which He had not yet revealed to me, and that it would be wrong to take another path. That night I reflected that it might be well for me to force myself to think all these new thoughts, to assume all these new and many responsibilities, to work hard, occupying myself more with the affairs of others than with my own. Think of this: hardly had I made up my mind when a letter was brought to me from the lady I had met in the train, asking for information concerning a certain matter, and giving me to understand, not openly, indeed, but covertly, that she wished me to call upon her. I felt a wave of bitterness rush over me at this fresh temptation which God had sent me at the very moment when I had made a great sacrifice in order to remain faithful to His laws. I took up my pen and wrote out the information the lady had asked for, omitting, however, any allusion to a future call. Then I devoted my attention entirely to the necessary preparation of myself for the office of mayor. My God, Don Giuseppe! All this happened a year ago, and I am still so wretched! If there be any means of salvation for me it can only come through my withdrawal from the world!"

The young man ceased speaking. Presently he seized the priest's arm, and pressed it spasmodically and passionately.

"Don Giuseppe, Don Giuseppe! Think, think!

Is it indeed impossible? The independent life of a hermit will not do for me. I need a prison to defend me against myself; I need four walls like the walls of a tomb, hard, cold and silent; and at this moment I am quite ready, I would gladly enter my prison to-morrow! I appeal to you in the name of my dead father, of my dead mother, whom you remember with so much affection! I entreat you!"

He would have thrown himself upon his knees as he uttered these words had Don Giuseppe not prevented this by quickly folding him in his arms. The priest's broad, majestic brow irradiated pity and sorrow, his eyes were dim, and his voice died out in a silent, spasmodic contraction of the lower part of his face.

"No," he replied, speaking with difficulty and after a long pause. "No, not the cell. The cell at present would not do for you."

"Why, why?"

The old man looked at him for a moment, and then whispered sadly, "Because all your temptations would enter it with you. Because the world is still too deeply rooted in your heart; and although you might believe you were fleeing from it, you would in reality, be carrying it with you."

"But perhaps God would give me more strength."

Don Giuseppe sighed as one who is grieved because his words are not believed.

"We will discuss that later," he said. "Tell me, meanwhile, why you are so unhappy at present."

"I will. In the first place my faith is constantly diminishing. A few minutes ago I spoke of doubts. I will confess at once that my doubts arise from sentiment, they are instinctive doubts, and I am aware that, in reality, they derive rather from an aggregate of impressions than from ratiocination. Ever since those first temptations of the senses and my movement of rebellion against God who had laid down this terrible law, this law against my bodily nature, and who would not help me to obey, ever since that time—and this is a circumstance which may be damning to me, but which is, nevertheless, perfectly true—I had begun to be exasperated by the sort of religion I saw around me ; exasperated by my father-in-law's scruples, my father-in-law, who is always prating of Christian humility, who kneels before the Bishop and who nevertheless would crawl up the stairs of all the Government offices on hands and knees if he could only become a senator ! I was even exasperated at times by the religious practices of my mother-in-law, who, with all her piety and kindliness, often suggests to her husband acts of outrageous meanness in business matters. Certain pious persons exasperated me, who come regularly every night to spend a dull evening at Casa Scremin for the sake of a good feed there once a week. Then there were other pious persons, some misers, some slanderers, and all full of venom against everything and everybody, and absolutely ferocious against such unfortunates as had yielded to an unlawful passion. A certain Pharisaical formalism, certain idolatrous superstitions, certain pagan incense burnt before mere men irritated me. At that time I sought to banish this feeling, looking upon it as a temptation to sin against charity and humility. But, ah, Don Giuseppe ! how it has increased in the year that I have passed as mayor, in the midst of the active and militant branch of a party which already mistrusts me, because it has guessed something of what is going on within me! I will not tell you of all the meanness and the despicable baseness, all the petty intrigues and ambitions, all the rancour that is continually fermenting around me. Pray do not imagine that I admire those others, my usual opponents in the town council. They are men who are ever ready to bully those who neither strike back nor retaliate in any way, men who are lavish with sentimental words, but miserly with money; men who fear holy water while they live, and the devil when they come to die; men always riding the high horse upon Rome and the liberal monarchy, for which I am willing to take my oath three out of four of them care not at all. I have no admiration for such men, but they, at least do not press forward in God's name. I take no heed of them. But this is my terrible, haunting thought: Can it be possible that those other despicable creatures, those puny, malicious, foolish creatures, be in sole possession of the truth, of the secret of all Being, the secret of the human soul and of our future destiny? For a time I entrenched myself behind the reasons for belief which my own brain, my own heart, contained, but now I no longer feel safe even there. Answer me this: Can I be sure that my faith did indeed originate in my own ratiocination, my own sentiment? Can I be sure that it was not sown there and fostered by my educators. Can I be sure—forgive me, Don Giuseppe!—that they did not distort my brain and heart that they might form them into receptacles for that artificial culture of theirs, so that, after all, it is their faith and not mine, that lives in me, because I have never been free to believe or disbelieve, and am only now acquiring that freedom? Their faith! Perhaps it is simply that faith that was forced upon them also in their tender years, distorting their intellect also. Do you understand what a frightful doubt mine is? For this reason also I long to bury myself in a convent of Trappists, among pious men who have kept nothing for themselves, who have given all to God; men I must of necessity admire, and who have also received their faith from their educators, but who have greatly increased it, by their own strength, within themselves. Is it not possible, Don Giuseppe? Is it not possible?"

"Certainly not!" Don Giuseppe exclaimed almost angrily. His face was cold and stern like the face of a physician who has been but slightly moved by his patient's lamentations, but who, having listened to the beating of his heart, has heard the halting step of death down in the depths. He believed Maironi had finished, and, as if doubtful how to begin, his face and his hands, which were clasped before his breast, working uneasily and expressively, he said:

"Well——"

Maironi whispered quickly in a despairing voice:

"I have not finished, Don Giuseppe. I have not finished."

"Ah, very well! Tell me everything."

Piero did not speak at once. The most painful words of all, perhaps, must now be spoken. They formed a lump in his throat, and would not come forth.

"If you believe it is best for you to speak," said Don Giuseppe kindly, "be brave."

"Yes, dear Don Giuseppe, I will be brave! You remember I mentioned a lady to you? A lady I met one day in the train, and who afterwards sent me a note to which I replied in writing, that I might not be tempted to go to her? Well——"

"Ah!" Don Giuseppe exclaimed involuntarily, under his breath.

"Wait!" cried the young man. "Perhaps what you are imagining is worse than what I am about to tell you! After all, I see no reason for hiding anything from you at such a moment as this. The lady is Signora Dessalle, of Villa Diedo. You have surely heard of her. Have you heard evil of her? much evil?"

"Well, yes. I certainly have not heard much good of her," Don Giuseppe replied, greatly embarrassed, and speaking unwillingly. "Not much good. However, it struck me that, after all, the accusations were vague, and were perhaps, only idle gossip and unjust suspicions."

In his desire to discover the probably false nature of this gossip, the old man's fine eyes were now shining with a happy light. Maironi, noticing that benevolent expression, concluded that Don Giuseppe was kindly disposed towards the person of whom he had been speaking as of a peril, and once more he seized the old man's hands and pressed them, unconsciously questioning him with his eyes, almost as if hoping to hear his sentiment alluded to in indulgent language. Don Giuseppe did not understand.

"What is it?" said he. The benevolent light had already faded from his eyes.

Maironi answered sadly:

"Nothing. What was I saying? I believe it was all slander, and the odious stories that were told about her in the beginning have now ceased to circulate. I believe she is virtuous. You are aware she is separated from her husband? She applied for a separation because her husband drank and beat her. She is virtuous from self-respect, from pride, you see, perhaps also from disgust and a strong moral sense, but not from any religious sentiment. My God! How can I make you understand what has passed between us? For there have been no acts, and I can only try to describe the phases through which my soul is passing, which I feel in her also, and which mean everything. Yes, I see the workings of her soul plainly enough, for she is very passionate and apt to betray herself, even when she is struggling against herself, even when, from pride perhaps, she is fighting her own inclinations, and is hostile towards me. I have discovered that she, like myself, received the first impression in the train. The first time I called upon her I was with Deputy-Councillor Bassanelli, a friend of the Dessalles and a comrade in arms of my father; he limps still in consequence of a wound he received at Palestro. Bassanelli wished to show me the narrow communal road leading to Villa Diedo, that the commune has been called upon to mend. We met Signor Dessalle, who insisted upon our going into the house. I came away alone. Of course, you know Villa Diedo? You have surely been there to see the frescoes by Tiepolo. As I came out upon the western terrace, among those swaying roses that cover the balustrades, as I went down the steps towards a glorious sunset, I felt the intoxication, as it were, of a strange dream, and at the same time I felt a silent pain, that throbbed in the very centre of my being. I had seen that this woman wished me to fall in love with her, and I was attracted to her, not through my senses, for they were silent, not through my soul, for my soul was afraid, but by some magnetic fascination. Now—and this is a point I have never been able to understand, and never shall understand if you do not help me—the idea of a spiritual bond, of a purely spiritual bond between myself and this woman, terrified me far more than the idea of sinning deeply and grossly with the first unfortunate I might meet on the street. I went to Villa Diedo very often after that, and for some time almost unwillingly, drawn probably by the magnetism. I went there like one who is in love, but I did not believe I was in love. I could not help often looking at her, often speaking to her when we were alone, as one who loved her indeed, but was seeking to control his feelings. Meanwhile I must tell you that my other temptations had ceased to torment me. It was perhaps for this reason that my confessor cited to me a passage from the *Imitation of Christ,* to the effect that we need not necessarily turn at once from every affection that has the appearance of evil, and he did not order me to cease visiting her. He is a holy man, but, with the exception of sins, there are certain things he cannot understand. To tell him these things would be worse than useless. Well, very recently, within the last few days, indeed, there has been a change. I feel, I see, I know that if at first it was caprice on her part, it is now passion, a passion she has ceased trying to conceal. Only yesterday she was on the verge of confessing as much to me. And for the last three days I have feared that real passion was taking hold of me also, for my moral sense has even become dulled at times. At certain moments it seems to me that in the presence of love, every moral restraint should cease, should be swept aside, and that love should be free to accomplish all its desires. I still rebel against such thoughts, they still fill me with horror, and I banish them, telling myself that though I may entertain them in imagination, I should never be capable of assenting to them in deed. Then, from time to time, a mighty reaction of all my powers of resisting evil takes place within me, a reaction of faith, of mystic yearnings, even of tenderness for my unhappy wife, for the memory of my father and mother. Good and evil alternate in me with a violence which I am no longer able to endure. Shall I tell you all? My only calm moments, my only restful moments, are when I am with this woman. Her presence soothes rather than excites me. It is true I am worse afterwards. I do not know how I can go on attending to the duties of my office. People must already see that something is wrong. It is not possible to hide it. Last night I could not sleep, but I had a good hour, and I wept and prayed fervently, It was then that the idea of withdrawing from the world came to me, and I felt the Lord had inspired me to come to you, so——"

Violent sobs unrelieved by tears choked his voice. Don Giuseppe laid his hand gently upon his head.

"No," said he, "no, my son. Why despair? You may indeed feel sorrow, but you must not fear. You are being tossed about by the waves while a great storm rages, but, believe me, Christ is with you in the bark! Christ, who sleeps."

"Talk to me! Talk to me!" Maironi murmured. He knelt at the feet of the priest, who no longer sought to prevent him.

"Yes, my son, yes. In the first place you must not be so terrified by your temptations. Do not fancy you are more sorely tempted than some others who seem to you to be safe from evil and to belong entirely to God. As to your temptations against faith, if you will persevere in resisting them I do not think they will prove formidable. Had it not been for the temptations of the senses which were so violent, and which might easily have been foreseen when we consider the frailty of human nature, probably these others would not have assailed you. Why was your faith shaken? Because you believed God did not help you to obey His stern law, because you feared your faith had been forced upon you, because you saw many narrow-minded Catholics around you, who did not seem to live up to the evangelical ideal. Now observe how slight these objections really are. God does not help you? How dare you say He does not help you? He did indeed allow you to be tempted, but when you struggled, when you conquered as you have told me, who gave you the power for good? Do you not know that *nemo potest esse continens nisi Deus det?* God acts in secret and we may not be conscious of what He does within and around us, but we surely could not conquer the flesh without His aid. Even though He once allowed you to fall, He raised you up again without delay.—Your faith forced upon you? That is true, if you will, true, at least, to a certain extent; but does that seem to you sufficient reason for rejecting it? Would you reject the notions of science that were instilled into your mind as a boy simply because they were not proved to you? Is not this rather a fresh stimulus to consider, to ponder upon the rational foundations of our faith, which are indeed magnificent; to fulfil one of the duties of every intelligent and cultivated Christian, which is, alas, too little understood, too often neglected, the duty of elevating our own conception, of forming a conception of Catholic truth above the popular and childish conception; of forming a conception for ourselves which shall be in just proportion to that faculty which God has bestowed upon us in order that we may recognize and glorify Him? And as to the disgust with which some persons inspire you—get up, and sit here—that is indeed a weak argument! Let us admit that these persons are all you say, I will not judge them; perhaps their intentions are better than their deeds. I wish, however, to assure you that your mother-in-law may have some little weaknesses—I cannot judge of that—but nevertheless, hers is a most lofty Christian soul. But let that pass. Do your parents-in-law, their friends, your colleagues, and perhaps a hundred other so-called pious people, represent to you the whole Catholic Church, the Church of all places and of all times? Has not the Catholic Church produced a crowd of holy men, of great men, who have had a well-balanced conception of religious truth and of the best way to practise it? And have you yourself never found moral greatness in humble persons who know nothing of parties, and who ardently profess the Catholic religion? It seems incredible! You are not aware of it, but it is passion that prevents you from seeing things in the right light. Believe me, I might approve of apostles who should rise up and preach the elevation of the Christian spirit in the Church, but could I leave her because to-day, in her human element, she does not correspond with the ideal we cherish? Then, by the same reasoning, if we are patriots, let us go into exile! Am I not right?"

As he spoke thus the old priest looked at Piero with all his soul glowing in his brimming eyes, that were full of a fervent appeal to reason. With parted lips he waited for an answer, bending eagerly forward towards Maironi, and speaking to him still, with his face and his shining eyes.

"Pardon me," the young man replied, greatly distressed. "Perhaps there may be some other reason for my doubts, a more occult reason of which I am ignorant."

Don Giuseppe sighed.

"Listen," said he, after a short pause. "While you were talking to me of the person who attracts you, I thought of something. If the experiment of public life has not proved successful, why not abandon it? If you are not pleased with your colleagues, why remain at the town hall? And should you decide to leave the town hall suddenly, would you wish to remain in the city and submit to the annoyance of the pressure that would be brought to bear upon you, of the questions that would be asked, of the tales that would be told concerning you? Why not go and spend a year or two in your parents' home? I believe the life you would lead there would greatly benefit you. It is a country that is in itself spiritual, favourable to self-concentration, full of—how shall I express it?—of chaste sweetness."

"And so——" Maironi said softly. The word that should have followed died upon his lips. Why should he utter it? Don Giuseppe himself had not pronounced it, though all he had said concerning the town hall, the city and Valsolda had simply meant that one word: Renunciation!

"But you were willing to enter a convent?" Don Giuseppe added, seeing him hesitate.

Maironi turned slowly towards him with open arms, embraced him, and, hiding his face upon the priest's shoulder, murmured:

"It would be easier to withdraw from the world."

Then in his turn the old priest threw his arms around the young man, and spoke grave words to him, his lips touching Piero's hair. The low ring of those pious words was deep and intensely sweet.

" My son, you must remain in the world, and still you must withdraw from it. Your cell must be in your own heart, in the deepest recess of your heart. Yes dear, shed tears of grief, but shed tears of tenderness also. There is One who at this very moment is preparing your cell, who is waiting there to welcome you, who is calling out to you to come to Him, to rest your head upon His breast because He is so full of pity for you, because He so longs to forgive everything, everything, everything! Enter, enter! Do not resist! You say your sufferings are great? Yes, because you consider only the things of this world to which you are bound, and although Jesus is in them also, it is the stern Jesus, the sad Jesus, and there is nothing that can make the heart ache like the stern, sad face of Jesus. Believe me, the bitterness of your heart is a precious gift! How can you live in such torment, how can you resist turning from the stern Jesus to the loving Jesus? And your very temptations are a precious gift also, for, by the very fact of their unusual violence, they bear witness that the Lord has appointed you to fulfil some high destiny. I speak thus according to the word of an archangel, one of the deepest words that has reached us from the angelic world. You say the temptations of the senses have diminished, and that you cannot understand why the danger of binding yourself to this woman through your soul should be more terrifying to you than the danger of a purely sensual fall. Your terror is justified, for the very vileness of the purely sensual sin is at first a restraint, and afterwards generates that impulse of remorse and loathing which soon helps the sinner to rise again. On the other hand, the tie which is believed to be of the soul alone leads, little by little, when occasion presents itself, to certain familiarities, which grow more and more sensual, and produce an undue excitement of the body, which mingles with the undue excitement of the spirit. Then in this natural mingling of body and spirit the sin appears less vile, a less hideous distortion of human nature, and generates no hatred of the accomplice, as in the first instance, but generates rather a closer union in evil doing, a proud, blind, self-satisfied union, which lasts until the hour of atonement arrives, and body and soul grow cold. Thank your God that He has warned you of a danger you could not see, by means of a horror you could not understand! Do not delay, cease seeing this woman at once, and, fearless of your doubts concerning the Faith, hide yourself in the arms of Jesus. And so I shall give you no more advice as to whether you had best go away or remain, for I already see you enfolded in those arms, resting upon that breast, and I know that I may only repeat: Ask Him! Listen to Him! But when you shall have confided all your desires to Jesus, I pray you, at the end, to remember this old priest, whose spirit is still so hampered by a miserable body, which grows ever weaker, but will not pass away. Do you understand me, my son?"

Maironi did not answer, but wept as he kissed the hem of the holy man's garment. And the holy man bent his head, and let his lips rest upon Piero's hair, while his eyes gazed reverently upward, towards the invisible.

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It was no longer raining. Pale rays from the sun that was half hidden behind yellow-tinged clouds enlivened the sleepy garden, and shone upon the damp steps of the villa, where Don Giuseppe was standing with a sad smile upon his face, and calling Maironi's attention to the picture presented by the plain, that faded away on one side towards the bluish, cone-shaped Euganeian Hills, on the other towards the thin wall of the Berici; and he was also telling him of the garden he had planned, designed and created upon this uncultivated plain and this wild hillside; how he had gradually improved it from year to year, and dreamt of it blossoming in the future, not, indeed, for himself, but for other souls he had loved, but who, contrary to all human prescience, had left this world before him.

"There," said he, pointing towards the Euganeian Hills, "Praglia is over there."

In order to be free to call upon Don Giuseppe, Maironi had told them at home that he was going to take a day's rest, and that he wished to re-visit the Benedictine abbey of Praglia. Now he was no longer anxious to go there. Don Giuseppe, however, encouraged him to do so. The ancient monastery was so magnificent in its sadness! It was so well adapted, in its majestic solitude, to those meditations of which Maironi stood in the greatest need. The old man's face glowed with animation as he talked of the nobly-proportioned and severe courtyards, of the Crucifixion by Bartolomeo Montagna in the refectory, of the shameful state of neglect in which the Government had left this splendid monument, and of the still more serious outrages which were feared at that time, and which were, in fact, perpetrated later on. It was like the cowardly murder of a grand old man, a crime committed in silence, to which the surrounding solitude was an accomplice. Maironi, whose thoughts were elsewhere, was a poor listener. He was thinking of that other distant solitude, Valsolda. Only the day before a letter from Valsolda had informed him that the mandarin-tree in the little hanging-garden was in a pitiful condition after the hard winter; that the venerable passion-flower vine on the terrace was dead; that the roof of the hall needed repairing, as did also the piles forming the foundations in the lake, and that an early visit from the master was eagerly looked forward to. While Don Giuseppe was telling him of the painful state of neglect into which Praglia had fallen, he was thinking of the little deserted house where his father and mother had died, and which he visited only twice a year: once on All Souls' Day, and again in May, to provide flowers for the little garden. The priest became conscious he was not listening, and lapsed into silence. Then, as if seeking to discover his guest's thoughts in matters that were nearer at hand, he spoke of a visit Marchesa Nene had paid him the year before.

"She wished a Mass said for your wife in my chapel over yonder. Your wife was here once as a child, and took the greatest delight in blowing the organ. The Marchesa also asked for some oranges from my orangery—though, indeed, they are very sour—but your wife enjoyed them when she was here, and often spoke of them afterwards. The poor woman also begged me to send a word of comfort with the oranges." At this point Don Giuseppe smiled pityingly and sadly, as if to say: "Fancy how little any word of mine can avail!"

"However, I will send a message with the oranges," he said, and added: "I was really filled with the greatest reverence for the poor Marchesa. You know, she seldom gives expression to her true feelings—she never says startling things. Well, just here where we are standing, I remember she spoke these very words without tears, without exhibiting much emotion: 'Don Giuseppe, tell the Lord I can bear it no longer!'"

When one recalled the calm mask the old lady always wore both before her own people and before the world, these seemed tragic words indeed. Although Maironi had on several occasions caught glimpses of the secret depths of her soul, these words now came as a reproach to him; he felt the moral inferiority of his own nature, which was so quick to forget, so sensual. At the same time a doubt flashed across his mind as to whether his will be not, after all, powerless against this fatal tendency that dominated his whole being, and from his swelling heart there rose a bitter: Why? But he quickly humbled himself out of reverence for the lofty spirit that was near him.

"Don Giuseppe," he said, when the servant had announced that the carriage was ready, "do you really believe the Lord will help me?"

"Most certainly, if you do not doubt His aid."

A small basket of oranges had been placed on the seat of the carriage. Maironi turned to Don Giuseppe. "They are the oranges I told you about," said Don Giuseppe humbly, as if in apology. The young man pressed his hands warmly, but was unable to speak. As the little carriage was about to start he controlled himself sufficiently to raise his hat, and thus silently returned the farewell greeting of the old priest, who was also silent and deeply moved.

II

At first the little carriage followed the crests of a series of low hills, passed a village, a river, more villages, rolled along a narrow, winding and vagabond road that led across the plains as far as the outposts of the Euganeian Hills, and then turned into the avenue of majestic plane-trees that skirts their lonely flank on the north.

Where this flank faces about to look eastwards and then stretches away to the south, a broad road branches off from the highway which it follows for a time, to bring up in about five minutes at the gloomy wall that girts the great deserted monastery, the battlemented tower, the beautiful and mighty temple of the *Quattrocento*, resting upon an enormous cube of black rock, from which burst forth here and there, as if in league with rebellious thought, the rebellious, living grasses. Maironi accomplished the entire journey without once looking to right or left, absorbed as he was in the drama that was going on within him, haunted by visions of Villa Diedo, and by the spectre of Valsolda. From time to time also the demands of much pressing and important public business, to which he was in duty bound to attend, came to torment him, although he strove not to listen to them. On the whole, his conference with Don Giuseppe had left his soul full of gratitude, of a new feeling of reverence, of ardent affection for the saintly old man; but with this sentiment was mingled a sense of disappointment of which he had not at first been conscious, but which gradually became manifest as he pondered the bare words, the words unaccompanied by the gentle, serious voice, by the aspect of the holy face, by the atmosphere surrounding that immaculate spirit. He suspected that he had but imperfectly revealed himself, had been but imperfectly understood, and he furthermore suspected that the advice to fly to some solitude and to dwell there, had been prompted by an inexact conception of his nature, had been suggested by the desire to replace the monastery, which was impossible, by a way of life resembling the monastic life. Now, he had dreamed of sacrifice, of harsh penances, but the idea of dwelling idly in a pleasant home terrified him. Ah, but perhaps God would help him! Perhaps the strange coincidence of Don Giuseppe's advice and that letter from Valsolda signified an interposition of Providence! When he found himself confronted by the dark, encircling walls and the battlemented tower of Praglia he reflected that possibly the Divine Voice might speak to him there, in the silence of the ancient monastery. He was suddenly and violently aroused from his meditations by the noise of horses trotting rapidly, and of wheels grating on the gravel. A victoria coming from the monastery passed close to him, and a well known voice cried: "Maironi! Maironi! Stop, stop!"

The little carriage came to a standstill, and a fashionably attired young man, who had jumped out of the victoria, came running up to the door.

"At last!" said he, with a strong Tuscan accent. "You see, *Signor Sindaco*, what a surprise we have prepared for you! We heard that our lord and master was coming to Praglia, and we, who are his most faithful subjects, promptly followed him. But we expected to find you here, and were somewhat puzzled. Jeanne is up at the monastery. I am going to look out for the welfare of my horses, but I shall be back directly. Look here, you have no umbrella, and you have not even raised the hood! You will surely catch something terrible with this fine, cold rain, which is full of germs in April, I believe!"

Maironi had not even been conscious it was raining. Upon catching sight of Carlino Dessalle he felt, even before hearing him say so, that his sister was at Praglia, that she had come on his account, and that it was impossible for him to turn back. A flame leapt up in his heart! Was it thus that God was helping him? Was not this rather derision of one who had looked for a revelation of the Lord's will in the peace of the monastery, and derision of His minister as well, of that saintly old man who had advised this journey? He silenced his inward rebellion, and greeted Dessalle, not, however, without embarrassment. When Dessalle had left him Piero ordered the driver to proceed at a walk. Good God! How should be bear himself at this first meeting? Should he let her guess the state of his soul, his resolution to leave her, or should he seek to hide it, and dissemble? Yes, yes, he must dissemble. But he must not go too far, for that would be disloyal. He must get away as soon as possible. But what pretext could he invent for hastening his departure? What pretext, dear Lord? The horse's hoofs rang upon the stones of the threshold, and Maironi, whose heart was beating violently, sought to assume an expression of indifference as the little carriage entered the portico of the rustic courtyard.

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There was no one there. Piero remained motionless for some time, contemplating the trembling of the fine and fast-falling rain-drops, as they beat upon the thick grass, upon the graceful, sixteenth-century well, upon the lofty flank of the monastery that towered close by on the left, with its small Gothic windows, the high windows of the great, inner, eighteenth-century stairway, the tiny trilobate arches of the terra-cotta cornice. He looked and listened, but he heard no step, no voice. At last, steeling his heart by means of all his good intentions, he turned to the left, towards a door that was partly open. He pushed it wide ; a vision of soaring arches rose before him, and he was conscious of the pious, admonitory thought of past ages, and of a stern and chaste beauty. He entered, and suddenly ceased to feel, ceased to see all this gentle *quattrocento* loveliness. Not ten paces from him, Signora Dessalle, enveloped in a long dark green cloak lined with fur, a high collar of skunk framing her pale face, stood motionless, gazing at him.

She was gazing at him with the same serious look she had at last fixed upon his face that day in the train, after many fleeting glances, an uncertain wavering of her eyelids, and an apparent struggle with herself. The great eyes of this woman in whom every movement of her tall and slender person, every line of her rich and severe toilet betrayed innate refinement, had, even then, made his heart beat faster, for in the depths of their steady gaze he had seen the mingling of hidden passion and irony that gave them that indefinite tinge of voluptuous maturity. She had been the first to let her eyes fall beneath the young man's gaze. Then, with slow, unstudied movements of the hands, and looking out of the window the while, she had opened the long, dark green cloak lined with fur, thus revealing glimpses of the exquisite lines of her figure. Her face and movements testified to such thorough good breeding that the bare thought that she had performed this act intentionally, had caused Maironi the keenest pleasure. The lovely eyes, once more becoming restless, and wandering aimlessly here and there, had at last returned to rest upon his eyes, and had made his whole being ache with delight. And now, after many months of familiarity, she still looked at him with the same expression, standing speechless and motionless, and enveloped in the same cloak with the high collar of skunk framing her pale and serious face. The lovely, dark eyes were saying: "Here I am. I came on your account. Have I done wrong? I am waiting for a word from you."

The young man bowed with a forced smile, and held out his hand, which she did not grasp.

"Were you hoping to be alone up here? Shall I go away?" she said with her fine, rapid utterance and her accent that was purity itself. And slowly, almost timidly, a hand in a white glove appeared from beneath the half-open cloak, while her steady gaze sought an answer in the depths of his eyes.

Maironi pressed the proffered hand and murmured a "thank you," that was intended to spare him a direct and discourteous answer, but his tone was cordial. Immediately, however, on seeing her happy smile, he felt a twinge of remorse.

"Do you approve of my *toilette?*" said she. "Do you remember it?" And still smiling, she threw the cloak a little farther back, once more revealing the exquisite lines of her figure.

The colour left his face, and he answered coldly that he remembered well.

"I knew you would! It is true I feel the cold very much, but I really wore this cloak because I was sure you would remember. I fear you have never since thought me so charming as that day in the train. Am I right ?"

"Well, you see," he replied laughingly, "my heart is always very susceptible when I am travelling !"

The young lady frowned and murmured : "You bad boy !" then quickly added : "But you do think me handsome—very handsome—do you not ? Even now ?"

"Very handsome indeed !" the young man exclaimed with a low bow. His tone vexed her.

"If I were not such a coward with you I should turn my back upon you !" said she. "You do vex me so ! You are always so entirely master of yourself, while I immediately betrayed myself as soon as I began to feel. I don't know how to dissimulate, and, after all, I don't care ! Tell me ! Did you think I was light that day in the train ? Did you think I was a flirt ?"

"No. I might have set another woman down as light and a flirt, but not you with that look of sincerity in your eyes."

"But you told me afterwards that you did !"

"That was only to tease you."

"And now, do you think ill of me for coming here ?"

Maironi hesitated an instant before answering :

"No."

"Why did you stop to think ? Now I know you think ill of me. What did you really wish to say ? You only said 'no' out of pity. You have the same opinion of me that many of your precious peasants have !"

He was aware of the infamous calumnies concerning Jeanne Dessalle that had been spread by some fool or some thoughtless tale-bearer, and he now protested so indignantly, so warmly, that her eyes brightened with the sweetest of smiles.

"Indeed, I am not wicked. I am very good," she said in a sorrowful voice, with an aggrieved look, and she made a little pouting grimace, like a peevish child. "Only I cannot hide what I feel. I could not hide my liking for you that first day. And I do wrong, I have always done wrong, to thus betray my feelings, for you are a proud man, and wish to win the love of a proud woman by force. But I am humble, and so you do not care for me."

It was not the first time Signora Dessalle had spoken thus boldly to Piero Maironi. The first time she had shown him this side of her nature had been at Villa Diedo, in the little lonely grove that slopes down the hillside towards the silence of a narrow, deserted valley. She had then told him that she thought him so different from other men, so much better; that she was happy in his company, but that the anticipation of his visits always unnerved her; that she felt very timid in his presence, and that she dared to tell him these things because she knew he was a saint. Maironi, who was then unacquainted with her character, believed this was merely a caprice, a premeditated act of provocation, and was sure she would learn to despise him for his reserve. Later, however, he saw that Jeanne did not despise him in the least; that she was fiercely sincere, fiercely impatient of sensual caprice, and he was ashamed of himself, ashamed of his unworthy suspicion, feeling his own moral inferiority.

"Speak!" she insisted, for the young man did not answer.

Suddenly her eyes flashed. "What is it?" she cried. "What is the matter with you?"

"Nothing. There is nothing wrong with me. What should the matter be?"

Piero answered with a smile so forced that Jeanne's pale face at once assumed a look of anguish, of indescribable tenderness.

"Has something happened? What is it? Speak!" And she seized his arm.

"Be careful! The custodian!" Piero whispered, terrified.

"No, no! He is not here. He has gone to get the keys to the refectory. Speak! Speak!"

"But your brother will be here presently!"

"I don't care!" the woman cried. "Tell me what has happened!"

Her violence wounded Maironi. "Nothing," said he firmly. "Nothing has happened. I have formed a resolution, that is all."

"What resolution?"

The custodian appeared with the keys.

"Wait a moment," Piero replied. But what did she care for that man's presence? A movement of haughty commiseration showed in her troubled eyes and raised eyebrows. How could great love stoop to these petty acts of prudence?

"Lead the way," she said to the custodian. "Open the doors, and we will follow you presently." And heedless of the man, who stood grumbling, and did not obey, she turned to Piero. "What resolution?" said she.

"A resolution I shall impart to you sometime, but not now."

"Why? Is it going to pain me?"

"I beg you not to talk of it at present."

"How can I help talking of it? Oh, you don't understand anything!"

The bitter words were followed by a quickly repressed impulsive movement of her beautiful person as she leaned forward for an instant, trembling with love, despairing love shining upon her face, and in her humble glance.

"Oh! This is enchanting! This is a paradise!"

It was Carlino Dessalle who spoke thus enthusiastically from the threshold behind Piero. "My dear Maironi," said he, "listen to this fancy of mine. Praglia is the dream of a chaste and holy old man, who has supped off olives and pomegranates, and has been lulled to sleep by one of Bach's preludes—not, however, as you would be lulled to sleep by it! I think I may venture to affirm that his beverage has consisted only of distilled water."

"You have seen nothing as yet," said Maironi.

"Good Lord! How very precise these mayors are! Nothing, you say? I saw nothing indeed when I drove up here, because I was afraid of catching some complaint, thanks to the caprices of this sister of mine, who likes a fur cloak but likes the rain and the wind as well, and, above all, because she was simply insufferable, and tormented me all the way, accusing me of having occasioned a delay which, it would appear, might cause the sky to fall and the earth to pass away! But coming up on foot just now I received the *coup de foudre!* One glance was enough, you see. The battlemented tower, and that divine little balcony that leans over towards it, way up in the air—oh, of course you two did not even notice it!—like a greeting from the genius of the Abbey, who could not depart with the friars; and that dark, fifteenth century church, so large and solid in the elegance of its lines, firmly planted up aloft upon that square heap of great rocks, that are stowed away there like so many forgotten tomes from the pens of theologians, doctors and Fathers! All that made my heart beat faster; at least I felt something beat faster down in that direction, for my sister is not at all sure I have a heart, and I myself do not care whether I have or not! And then observe the *massiccità*—let the word pass, it is of my own coining—the Tuscan massiveness of this foundation, of this church wedded to this hill so Tuscan in appearance, of which only the cap of forest above the olive-groves is wild, but still so gentle in its movements, so serious, so incapable of assuming any uncouth attitude! It is indeed an ideal spot for meditation, with these rows of low cypresses like processions of little friars, rather *bornés*, to be sure, but simple and pious, in fact perfectly in keeping with the hill itself, which exhibits, in its lofty and ample body, the humility of profound devotion to the church which lies below it, but which, nevertheless, seems to soar above it, to dominate it. All this touched, shall we say my lungs, little sister?—for I hope I have a pair of lungs—and I gave utterance to such a string of oh! ohs! that I was breathless for five minutes afterwards."

"You seem to have got your breath again now," said Jeanne.

"Oh, yes! I am all right now.—And here again, this sublime little courtyard, this pure thought transformed into a dream! Observe the extreme grace of the narrow frieze, look at the terra-cotta cornice, the small trilobate arches, the symbolic pomecitrons, and those tiny shells drawn up in line like the beads of an ancient rosary! Now I have it! That saintly old man of mine probably had pomecitrons and not pomegranates for supper. And observe the grace even in what is colossal! Look at that tower that dominates without overpowering. Oh, let us allow our gratitude to soar upward towards the supreme font of all forms of beauty!"

"Carlino," his sister exclaimed, "don't play Carucci too long!"

"Nonsense—Carucci! Carucci is a monolith while I am made up of numberless elements. Carucci has only one note while I have a hundred. Carucci is an intellectual hypocrite. He has sentimentalized so long over the beautiful that now he really believes he is sincere. As a matter of fact he appreciates only blue wine, goats' cheese and good cooks! Let me have my say, if you please. Carucci is not, as am I, who do not write, a mirror reflecting things of many colours. An ever-changing mirror, now flat, now concave, now convex! Carucci finds the mirror only in the object, and sees only himself reflected in it; himself he sees everywhere. Do let me express my opinion!—Here we surely have the coat-of-arms of the monastery. A star. Most appropriate!"

And Carlino Dessalle, his eye-glass screwed into his right eye, raised his exceeding long, slim nose and his dark, wizened, but striking face towards the coat-of-arms of the monastery which was carved above a door, while his sister took Maironi's arm.

"Let us go," said she, and they joined the custodian, who seemed rooted to the spot where he still stood waiting, by the door giving access to the great stairway.

Although Dessalle was examining the star he saw her action, and his brow became clouded. He considered this sister of his, who was his senior, the most beautiful and fascinating of women, and at the same time he also believed that her soul was of the most lofty, and her judgment the soundest in the world. It seemed strange to him that his men friends should not all fall in love with her, and it seemed natural that she should at last be moved somewhat by the love of one or another, but he had never dreamt that she might, by word or action, forget her own dignity, even for an instant. Now he was beginning to believe this possible, and he was secretly much troubled. He could understand that his sister should cherish a great liking for Maironi, whom he himself esteemed most highly, in spite of the difference in their views. He understood less readily why she should take so little pains to hide her feelings while Maironi, although perhaps he also was in love, knew how to dissimulate. He had at first opposed this excursion to Praglia and had finally yielded only because he feared Jeanne would go alone; and now he was annoyed that, not satisfied with having run after Maironi, she should thus attach herself to him, even when he, Carlino, was present. He called her back to look at the coat-of-arms, and the tone in which he summoned her was very peremptory. Jeanne dropped Maironi's arm and reluctantly retraced her steps. Maironi did not follow her.

"*Vergisst mein nicht!*" said Carlino in an undertone, accentuating the *t* that marks the plural.

She raised her face with an expression of annoyance, and examined the star, murmuring:

"Rest assured I know how to behave myself!"

Carlino, who was really greatly pleased that she had understood him, now protested that he did not mean that. What an idea! Nothing of the sort!

Meanwhile Maironi was not contemplating the double row of slender arches beneath the graceful brow formed by the terra-cotta cornices, nor the tower soaring upwards as in an act of mediation between the cloister and the sky; he was gazing at the living disorder and rioting in the courtyard, of the grasses that seemed drunk with the spring. He contemplated the grasses, his troubled, aching heart full of that offer of immense love, full of the idea that perhaps God did not exist, or, at least, that He was different from the God of the Christian faith, since in remuneration of so many prayers, penances and struggles He should allow him to be tempted thus and at such a moment.

"You are fond of flowers? Those white ones are lilies, are they not? And the yellow ones are dandelions? But what are the pale blue ones? Listen to this fancy that has occurred to me concerning them. Don't all these flowers look as if they knew the stern friars and their greedy donkeys are no longer here, that there are no more commandments, or precepts, and so they have come wriggling out of that old trough over yonder in the centre, and are making love merrily all over the place? What do you say to that?"

Dessalle longed for at least one word of appreciation of his pretty whim, and so placed a finger on Maironi's shoulder. Maironi started and answered at random:

"Certainly!"

On the great eighteenth-century stairway that leads to the spacious corridors flanked by cells, while the custodian was pointing out the tablets commemorating the imperial Austrian visits of Francis I and Ferdinand I, and Dessalle was groaning as if oppressed by the combined weight of tablets and stairway, his sister once more took Maironi's arm, and murmured anxiously:

"Do not forsake me!"

He did not speak, but unconsciously pressed Jeanne's arm with his own, and then, terrified at what he had done, immediately relaxed his pressure. Her eyes, which had lighted up with pleasure, now questioned him despairingly.

Then, swayed by the dual workings of his will, and by an evil inward impulse, he spoke words he did not intend to speak, words he knew would mark the beginning of his defeat.

"I will tell you presently."

They were passing down one of the corridors leading to the small, jutting balcony that overlooks the dark approaches of the monastery, the side of the church, the great plain on the north, stretching away to the distant, snowy Alps. They did not hear the custodian, who was calling to them:

"*Signori*, this way!"

Dessalle shouted: "Jeanne!" Then they turned, and Carlino informed his sister that a happy thought had just occurred to him. As the Government, with its Superior Committee of Fine Arts, its lists of national monuments, its cataracts of ministerial rhetoric, its protective commissions, which protect nothing and destroy everything, was allowing such a jewel as this to decay and perish, it would be a fine thing to purchase it and convert it into a new sort of monastery for artists and poets, who should be bound together by a common appreciation of art, and who, having reached the age of wisdom, should have become indifferent to honours and love.

"Let us visit the cells," said Jeanne. But Dessalle declared that he would never dream of putting his foot inside one of those cells unless he could be preceded by an extra strong solution of corrosive sublimate. "I am especially apprehensive of monkish germs," said he. "Go in if you like, but don't stay long!"

They entered one of the cells. As soon as the custodian had once more stepped outside, believing they would follow him, Jeanne stopped.

"Well?" said she.

Maironi no longer wished to tell her anything. In her indignation she went to the little window, and spoke in an undertone, as she gazed out upon the fields:

"You are heartless! You are selfish! It pleases you to know I am in love with you, but you are afraid of compromising yourself. You would like to be able to speak and still be silent; you try to advance and withdraw at the same time; but you are careful never to advance far enough to endanger yourself, and never to withdraw far enough to offend me! You are odious! despicable!"

She turned and looked at him. The suffering in those sorrowful eyes, those pursed and tightly pressed lips, finally produced a revulsion to gentleness and pleading.

"Yes," said he, without drawing nearer to her, "despicable, above all, in my own eyes. My first resolution was to bury myself for ever in a monk's cell."

"Where? Here?" said Signora Dessalle mockingly. "That was your first resolution. What may your second have been?"

The custodian once more entered the cell, jingling his keys and saying that the lady's husband wanted her. Both Maironi and Jeanne understood what the man had thought of them. To the woman it mattered not at all. Maironi felt he had taken one step forward on the dark road leading to his surrender to passion.

"I had come to the conclusion you must be reciting the evening prayers," said Dessalle rather sharply. His sister replied that she had indeed experienced a certain inclination to enter a monastery while in the cell, and that Maironi had felt himself divinely summoned to assume the duties of sacristan to the convent. Knowing how incapable she was of hiding the traces of a different emotion under an affectation of flippancy, Carlino laughed and returned to his fantastic love-making with the monastery, to the pleasure of endowing it with new and imaginary beauties to be enjoyed first by himself alone, and to the delight of presenting these intellectual caprices of his in a strange form, and surrounded by his own cerebral atmosphere. He had compared the monastery to a dream, and like that unknown Carucci from whom he believed he differed so vastly, he was continually seeing his own dreams, his own aesthetic fancies reflected in it. He revelled in certain exquisite details, which spoke to him of his favourite *quattrocento*, but to the true soul of the venerable abbey, that animates every stone with a holy thought, to the soul praying there in the solitude with the majesty of greatness that is conscious of gradual dissolution in God, he addressed no question, nor did it speak to him. It was equally silent with Signora Dessalle. Jeanne, who had a keen understanding of all artistic matters, had not given one thoughtful glance to this magnificent architecture, but had wandered at random, her thoughts and senses bound up in Maironi's presence. Maironi himself felt that her flippant language concerning the vocation might perhaps have been intended as a slight thrust at him, but it had certainly also been meant as a handful of dust in her brother's eyes, and she had thus shown that she took his, Maironi's, complicity for granted. At first his blood surged with a thrill of pleasure at the thought, but then came the revulsion to annoyance. When his companions, who were preceding him, had passed through a doorless opening and turned from the corridor into the hanging courtyard, and he, who was at some distance behind them, found himself confronted by that bright space, that square surrounded by severe arches into which the sun poured freely beneath the pinnacle between the four columns, with the well-head in the centre, and the tabernacle jutting from an angle of the refectory, then the spirit of the monastery arrested him. Absorbed in his own drama, the young man had indeed forgotten that he was at Praglia. Suddenly he recognized the bright space, the square surrounded by arches, the well-head in the centre, the little tabernacle on the corner of the refectory. He shuddered and stopped. It was the scene of that inexplicable emotion, of that mysterious presence he had twice felt, at a distance of years. The sunlight, growing ever stronger, was shedding its increasing brilliancy upon the austere stones that formed the pavement of the courtyard and the faces of the arches, and they seemed to be glowing with internal life, sensibility and words. On the first occasion the spirit of the monastery had filled the lad with longings, on the second it had overwhelmed the man with reproaches, now it mutely repulsed him.

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"Maironi! What are you about, my dear fellow? Come here. There are some wonderful things here."

Dessalle dragged Piero out to the loggia and pointed out to him the dark crests of the hills that rose abruptly behind the roof of the opposite loggia.

"You must admit that Praglia is the Abbey of Morgante, of my divine Morgante! That is the 'hill of the giants!' What were you thinking about just now? You must not desert us, you know! Pray consider that Countess Importance and her daughters were to have come to Villa Diedo this afternoon, and that we ran away from them for your sake!"

Piero had often laughed with Carlino at this strange nickname which a certain lady, with whom both were well acquainted, had bestowed upon a gentlewoman of the town, of whose daughters it was rumoured that they had made a brave onslaught upon Carlino's celibacy.

"Not for your sake, for the sake of Praglia!" Jeanne corrected without looking round.

"Come, come! Don't be too hard on him, sister mine!" Dessalle exclaimed, stopping to make a sketch in his note-book of a graceful door beneath the arches on the east.

Maironi joined Signora Dessalle, who took no notice of him. They walked on a few steps side by side, without speaking.

"Yes, indeed, you are afraid!" Jeanne said at last in a low but ringing voice. "You will not confess it, but I am well aware you have a base opinion of me in spite of all your religion. And it is precisely because you have a poor, false idea of religion, of love, of me—of me especially—that you imagine I shall lead you into sin. That is it; you do not know me, you are incapable of knowing me. You believe that outside of your religion everything is impure and false, and must be shunned and hated."

"Do you know that I am not free?"

Piero stopped as he uttered these words. The mad woman had never before been mentioned by either.

Jeanne looked steadily into his eyes, and answered:

"I know."

A moment later, interpreting Piero's silence as a wish to spare her a bitter and obvious conclusion, she added hastily and incautiously:

"But I do not deprive your wife of anything!"

The words might be understood as Jeanne had really meant them, knowing, as she did, that Piero had long since ceased to love his wife, or they might be understood as meaning that, owing to Signora Maironi's condition, there was nothing left to deprive her of. This last interpretation flashed upon Piero. "Do not say that!" he exclaimed hotly, and started forward excitedly. Jeanne followed him, much alarmed. "How? What did you understand?" And having finally grasped the cause of his indignation, she protested so violently that she had not intended to allude to his wife's misfortune, and was so regardless of his repeated exclamations: "Pray leave me! Pray leave me!" that he was at last obliged to yield. Meanwhile, both had been unconsciously and unintentionally approaching one of the gates of the courtyard. The custodian, who had been watching Carlino sketch, now called out to them: "*Signori! Signori!* Are you not going to visit the refectory?" They slowly retraced their steps. "I believe you," said Maironi, his voice hoarse with emotion, "but I cannot go on like this! It will be better for me to go away, not only from you, but from everything; from everything I can possibly leave behind. That was my second resolution."

"Wait!" said Jeanne. To rid herself of the custodian she asked him to fetch her a glass of water, then she glanced at her brother, who was still drawing, and returning to Piero said: "Come with me," and drew him into the little loggia that juts out near the refectory, and overlooks the kitchen-gardens; she advanced with him as far as the parapet between the arches that face the boundless plain on the east, acting throughout with promptness and energy.

"Listen to me," she began rapidly, flinging herself upon the parapet. "There is no reason why you should avoid me, no reason why you should fear me. You do not know the nature of my sentiment for you, you do not know my soul. In my innermost heart I live for you only. I have always loved my brother in a motherly way, and I still love him dearly with a sense of maternal duty. I might almost say my whole external life still belongs to him, that I would even, if necessary, be ready to sacrifice to his interests the joy of seeing you. But my inner life, the life that is independent of my will, belongs to you. If I speak thus frankly and openly it is because my feeling for you contains nothing that must be concealed, nothing that can cause me shame, nothing that should alarm you, and also because I have great confidence in you. I ask for affection only, the rest is loathsome to me. This is perhaps owing to the coldness of my nature, or to pride; it may be the result of the six months I spent with a vicious husband—for you are aware that I myself am not free—it may be accounted for by any one of these causes, but the fact remains that I ask only for tenderness and affection. If you were tormented by evil imaginings I feel that I should purify your soul rather than debase it. I should purify it more thoroughly than fasting and prayers in the desert, for with the idea of fighting the enemy we must of necessity go forth to meet him, and no matter where you might wander you would always be followed by evil thoughts about me; in your mind I should become another being, become what I am not, a corruptress. But I——"

Here she hid her face in her hands and continued in a lower tone:

"I need your love, need it immensely, immeasurably! I shall fall into hopeless despair if you leave me. I shall sink into the depths of misery! Tell me you love me! Tell me you will not leave me! Do not kill me with grief!"

"Signora, here is the water," said the custodian behind them.

Jeanne rose from the parapet, deathly pale, her eyes red with weeping, and took the glass.

"*Si c'était du poison*," said she turning to Maironi, "*faudrait-il boire?*"

Her great, magnetic eyes were brimming with grief and infinite tenderness.

"*Je crois que non*," he murmured in spite of himself, his mind in a whirl, and his face as pale as if life were extinct within him.

In Jeanne's eyes there flashed the light of an ineffable smile. "This water is not clear," she said to the astonished custodian. Then, holding the glass beyond the parapet, and slowly, very slowly, pouring out the water to the last drop, she watched it with a smile, murmuring: "What joy! What joy! What joy!"

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It seemed then as if her eyes were suddenly opened to her surroundings. She left Piero and took her brother's arm affectionately; she wished to examine his sketch; suggested his sketching the hill that rose behind the loggia, but from a more advantageous point of view, which she crossed and re-crossed the courtyard in search of; she got him to explain the meaning of the inscription on the well-head—*aestus, sordes, sitim pulso*—went into ecstasies over the magnificent *lavabo* at the entrance of the refectory; drew Carlino into the little loggia above the kitchen-gardens, and pointed out to him the green sea of plains stretching away as far as the towers and cupolas of a distant city, showing humble and dark against the horizon. From that spot, and only from that spot did she glance with infinite sweetness at Maironi. Then turning towards the loggia dominated by the nave of the lofty temple and by the campanile, she imagined the scene on a moonlight night, with the silent coming and going of the monks, passing from the light into the shadow beneath the arcades, and she told her vision in a hushed voice, a rapt expression on her face. She regretted the disappearance of the monks, but then, glancing at Piero, she boldly expressed it as her opinion that the Catholic spirit of to-day was no longer in harmony with the poetry of this solitude. She maintained that the present Catholic combativeness might be suited to convents among the people, in the heart of cities, but that no one any longer thought of dwelling in the desert, and that although Catholicism was antiquated in spirit, it nevertheless tended towards all modern forms of action.

"There are still some timorous souls in the world," said Carlino. "There are those who are solitary by nature like myself, for example. I am in reality almost a Benedictine. If I only had faith enough, I should take the habit, and restore Praglia."

"You?" Maironi exclaimed. Jeanne's challenging words concerning the spirit of Catholicism had not offended him; the strange connexion between Dessalle's thoughtless words and the sentiments he himself had entertained so short a time before, did not move him. He laughed and his eyes sparkled. While Jeanne had been telling him of her love, which was at once so violent and so pure, he had felt that she was insensibly taking possession of him, and, at the same time, the idea was also encompassing him that his fears were, after all, only dreams; that the restraints of religion, the restraints of his obligations, were only the ties of things that were dead; that perhaps, the whole of Catholicism even was only a great, spectral corpse which still stood erect like the monastery. The hidden workings of his many past temptations against faith, which had always been repressed with terror but never conquered, were now becoming apparent, and had caused his sudden downfall before the onslaught of passion.

Hardly had he pronounced the words, "*je crois que non*"—and he had pronounced them almost automatically—when, like one who, standing naked on the shore, tests the cool current with his foot and then hesitates, but who, if he feel himself slipping down the bank, suddenly gives himself up to the current, so had he given himself up to the sentiment which no longer appeared to him in the light of a temptation, but as the offer of a God greater, kinder and more true than the God his masters had taught him to worship. For an instant, while his heart had hammered furiously, the walls, the arches, the columns of the monastery, had seemed to be whirling madly around him. He had felt a wild longing to clasp Jeanne's waist and drag her beyond the walls, out into the open ; to race across the grassy fields, through the olive-groves, over the hill-tops, shouting out to the sky his freedom and his joy. At the same time he had laughed inwardly at his own insane longing, and, trembling lest he should betray himself, had held this new, intense life a prisoner within his breast. And now he was glad Jeanne was not by his side ; it gave him extreme delight to see her apparently separated from him, knowing as he did that she was united to him in thought, that she was indeed inebriate with love of him. Meanwhile, breathing deeply, he listened to the dilating of his own soul. The intense sweetness of Jeanne's glance from the little loggia, where the water had in fancy been turned into poison, once more caused everything to whirl around him for an instant.

"You ?" said he, laughing. "Such a worldly man as you are ?"

"I am not worldly, my dear Maironi. I am interested in the study of worldly vanities, but I myself am not worldly, just as an astronomer is not necessarily celestial."

Jeanne who at that moment was carefully examining the ornamentations of the *lavabo*, the sea-fishes, and the tarsia in verd-antique and porphyry, summoned Maironi to her side by a gesture.

"I never know what to call you," she said softly, and added aloud : "What is this inscription ? Please explain it to me."

Piero translated the Latin motto which was carved inside the arch, above the marble basin :

OMNES VELUT AQUA DILABIMUR,

and bending forward as if to examine the exquisite marble, he whispered :

"Call me 'love'."

She made no answer, and he remained with bowed head to hide his burning face.

"Poor little friars!" Dessalle exclaimed behind them. "They are really all dead and gone, are they not? But look here, in what sense is that motto to be taken? It must be epicurean, surrounded by all that joyous ornamentation, that smile of the sceptical *cinquecento!* Let us eat, drink and enjoy while we may, eh?"

They entered the refectory. Jeanne, absorbed in her own beatitude, glanced absently at the whimsical mottoes entwined amongst symbolic carvings above each one of the wooden stalls that the eighteenth century had ranged from top to bottom, along the master walls of the square hall, beneath a collection of large pictures, overcrowded with huge figures. Dessalle, who was delighted with the carvings above the stalls and the witty and profound mottoes, left Jeanne, and taking Maironi with him, led him from stall to stall, reading, commenting and admiring in a loud voice. "Help me, Signor Maironi!" said Jeanne. "Carlino knows Latin." As Maironi was coming towards her, drinking in the sweet invitation that shone in those lovely eyes fixed upon his, she said in a faltering voice, standing beside the stall above which a crescent is carved: "What does *completur cursu* mean?" And when he was within a few steps of her she murmured with a slight, rapid uplifting of her face to his, the trembling word: "Love!"

She was smiling upon him.

Maironi could not speak immediately. Then she laughed twice; two thin, short jets of laughter, like jets from an open vein, escaping from beneath the pressure of the thumb.

"It means——" the young man began, and was going to add: "my soul turns to you, and is illumined and made complete by your light!" But Jeanne hastily interrupted him. "Never mind; tell me you love me! Do you really love me? Arrange to drive back to town with us!"

"Listen to this. How charming for a well! The words are: *Exercita purior!*"

"What does that mean?" Jeanne asked Maironi, for the custodian was standing near them. When she had heard the explanation she said: "Did no one of those friars ever reflect that by using his intellect, his heart, all the energy for good that was in him, outside these walls, he might become still more pure, still more healthy of soul?"

"And this one! This one!" cried Dessalle. "A siren, and the motto: *Dulcedine perdit!*"

"If I understand correctly that is no new sentiment!" Jeanne exclaimed with some warmth. Maironi was silent. Dessalle called the custodian, and inquired who the fresco of the Crucifixion was by.

"It is by Bartolomeo Montagna, a native of Vicenza."

Dessalle summoned his sister and Maironi to come and admire the great fresco. They came, but were unenthusiastic, to the great surprise and indignation of Carlino. They did not like the Christ at all, and in the other figures the artist's best manner was perceptible; that was all.

"But look at the Virgin! I am willing to confess that only one other Madonna in the whole field of art has ever impressed me more strongly than this one, and that was the Virgin by Van Dyck in the museum at Antwerp, upon whose lap rests the dead Christ, while she lets her arms fall at her sides as she lifts her face heavenwards—do you remember, Jeanne ?—that tearful face that says so plainly : 'Wherefore ? '—This Madonna is finer from a religious point of view. She is full of courage, she believes in her Son's resurrection. Standing before this picture even I am in danger of getting a slight attack of the fever of faith. In that case you would admit me into the city government as inspector of fine arts, would you not ? "

A smile flitted across Maironi's face, but his only answer was : " Very well ! "

IV

They left together at sunset in the same carriage. Before they had passed beyond the enclosure, and while skirting the dark bastion that supports the church, Dessalle exclaimed : " And the church ! We have not seen it ! " Upon leaving the refectory the custodian had twice asked Jeanne and Maironi if they wished to visit the church, but, receiving no answer, he had not pressed the point. And now again neither Jeanne nor Maironi spoke. The carriage was advancing rapidly, and the right moment was allowed to pass. Dessalle's imagination was busy with the silent monastery, with the solitude which surrounded it, its cypresses and olives, its small, trilobate arches, its escutcheons and mottoes ; busy with the friars of long ago, with the custodian and his keys, which, in that deserted place, seemed to be jingling out the strident hymn of triumph of the spirit of modernity. In his highly coloured and subtle language he recalled every particular, seeking for strange comparisons by means of which he was wont to fix what he had seen upon his mind, that it might become part of his very being, and more entirely his own. Presently he began to arrange the plot of a novel in which Praglia, offered for sale by the Government, should be purchased by a mystical Pole, who would there assemble a company of hysterical women for purposes of meditation and prayer, and the foundation of a new religion.

"What religion?" Maironi asked.

"Oh, never mind! Just a new religion. Let us say my own, if you like. Mine is the religion of doubt, a creed which, instead of forcing us to believe what we cannot possibly know anything about, forbids us to deny it, and commands us to doubt, for doubt is far more useful and far wiser than faith, because it predisposes to the admission of all possibilities. It is also more poetical."

Maironi burst forth with unwonted violence.

"No, no! Rather let us be all for or all against! It is better to deny. Affirm, if you will, that man created God because it suited his convenience to do so! Say that the God of religion is only a mask of the true God, and that you will not worship a mere mask! Or declare open rebellion, and say that the gift of your body and intelligence have placed you under no obligations; that you are not responsible for your desire for life and liberty, but that you demand both. Say these things if you will, but not what you have just said."

"Ah, these Catholics, these Catholics!" Dessalle retorted, smiling. "They are determined to make us absolutely impious! The nearer we draw to you, the less tolerant you become. One might really maintain that your religion teaches the hatred of one's neighbours. Just see how you treat the Protestants, and those poor Liberals who are so anxious to call themselves Catholics! All hatred of one's neighbours!"

"Nevertheless——" Jeanne began, turning towards Maironi as if intending to answer him regardless of her brother's words. But she suddenly broke off.

"Nevertheless?" Piero repeated expectantly.

"Nothing," said she.

The young man drew up the white rug of Russian wolf which was slipping from Jeanne's knees and his own, and as he tucked it into place, he met beneath it a hand which at first offered itself timidly, and then seized his as in a vice, while a lovely mouth carelessly let fall three words that restored peace:

"It is cold!"

No one spoke for some minutes. Jeanne in her turn arranged the rug, and much more successfully. It seemed to Maironi that this ponderous skin of the wild beast fell into folds under the touch of her skilful hands as if conscious of her right to command. He looked at the hand he longed to clasp, not daring, in Dessalle's presence, to gaze into Jeanne's eyes without speaking, and he could find no word to speak. As he gazed at the hand toying with the fur, it seemed to answer, as did also an ill-concealed smile: "Secret pressures must suffice!" The odour of the cloak which enveloped Jeanne's lovely person, the odour of the fur, of her delicately perfumed gloves, perhaps also of her hair, went to the young man's head in one warm wave, alternating, according as the wind veered and the horses changed their pace, with the fresh odour of the fields and of the damp road. It seemed to him that he was encompassed by her dark, sweet atmosphere, that this was the beginning of secret and delicious possession. They passed Don Giuseppe's villa showing white in the last western glow, above the garden that was full of shadows. Dessalle thought he could discern a priest sitting on the front steps, and concluded it must be the master of the house. He said he had heard him most highly spoken of, and asked Maironi if he was acquainted with him. At the same moment Jeanne, who had not been listening to her brother's remarks, pointed out to Maironi the crescent moon hanging in the eastern sky. "*Completur?*" said she, unable to recall the other word. Maironi did not appear to understand, and she repeated: "*Completur?* Tell me the other." "Ah, *Cursu, cursu!*" Dessalle exclaimed, and did not repeat his question. Meanwhile Jeanne's hand was seeking that other beloved hand beneath the fur rug, and was saying, with a warm pressure: "I know what you are thinking about, absent-minded one!" and the hand she pressed lied, when it answered: "Yes, yes! You know!" Then both would have liked to remain silent, but Carlino was a great talker. He told Maironi how scandalized his sister had been that he should have recommended that gardener, who was a splendid specimen of a Latin socialist, a real revolutionist, indeed. Several of the man's sayings having come to Jeanne's ears, she had proposed dismissing him, but Carlino was only too delighted to keep such a curious and savage animal caged in his garden. The animal, however, would not allow himself to be studied; he had a remarkably smooth and inoffensive shell into which he was wont to withdraw whenever his masters approached him. Meanwhile Jeanne and Piero were conversing secretly through their clasped hands, although she had indeed made a feint of drawing hers away very gently, and they let Carlino talk on without other interruption than an occasional laugh.

Carlino now brought forward the gardener's son, Ricciotti Pomato, and recommended him for the position of porter at the Library. The preceding year another had been appointed in his stead, but now the place was vacant again. To rid himself of the matter Maironi promised at once. But Carlino was indefatigable, and brought the conversation round to Marchese Scremin, who had persuaded his son-in-law to speak to the Dessalles and beg them to further his senatorial ambitions by using their influence with a certain powerful and intriguing Roman lady, whose friendship for an eminent statesman, an uncle of the Dessalles, was well known—a friendship presumably honest, according to Zaneto, but of a most ambiguous nature according to the world's judgment. He had also had himself presented at Villa Diedo, an act which had provoked the bitter man's satanic sneer and the comment: "Worldliness, all worldliness!" Since that first visit he had called upon them two or three times, wearing a most awe-inspiring top-hat, so Carlino said, and, like the gardener, armed with a shell. His was a smooth and unctuous shell of humility, within which he would hastily disappear, head foremost, as soon as Jeanne or Carlino essayed to sound him concerning those merits which the Government would be called upon to recognize in him. At this point Carlino stretched him tenderly upon an imaginary dissectingtable, and proceeded to examine him in search of the aforenamed merits. Finally, his companions appearing quite oblivious to his chatterings, he also lapsed into silence.

A slender and lofty tower, a few squat *campanili* and a solid mass of low roofs were beginning to rise out of the plain in front of the carriage, beneath the snowy brows of the distant mountains. It was the city, the dismal end of the expanse of sky, open to dreams, of the earth, stretching away in such perfect peace, all odorous with life and freshness ; the dismal end for Jeanne and Piero of this soft and swift onward flight while they sat silent, thrilling to the very depths of their being at every jolt of the carriage that brought shoulder gently against shoulder. The carriage drew up before the Dessalle's stables at the corner of that steep and narrow road that leads up to Villa Diedo. There was an invitation to dinner for the next day, and then short greetings, already warm with the thought of the happy morrow, were hastily exchanged. As Piero was alighting, intending to enter the city on foot, the coachman informed him that he had a small basket of oranges belonging to the *Signor Sindaco*, which the driver of the fly had entrusted to him. Dessalle now ordered him to drive the *Signor Sindaco* to Palazzo Scremin.

The little basket of oranges was placed opposite Piero on the movable seat of the victoria. He understood their tragic message, but remained unmoved by it. It might perhaps be a reproach to fate, but not to him. He fixed his eyes upon the golden fruits, his senses soothed by the persistent perfume of the woman whose seat he had now taken. Once more he saw Jeanne in the loggia at Praglia with the glass in her hand; once more he basked in the sadness of her great, magnetic eyes, in the ineffable, gentle ring of those soft-spoken words: "*Si c'était du poison, faudrait-il boire?*"

CHAPTER III

ECLIPSES

I

SEVERAL town councillors of the clerical majority were to meet privately at the house of Doctor Záupa, one of the members, at four o'clock.

At five minutes to three a very gentle ring of the bell made the honest councillor start. Two individuals, a priest and a layman, entered with a somewhat mysterious air. The layman pulled out his watch, and said, addressing Záupa: "Will that do?" Smiling, rubbing his hands and making a series of jerky bows, Záupa answered: "Most punctual! Most punctual!" and ushered his visitors into the sacred precincts of the parlour. The priest a short, spare man, with a cunning face and eyes full of mockery, was one of the secret leaders of the party, one of the three or four who kept in the background and moved the victorious black pieces on the chess-board by means of hidden wires. The other, a fine-looking man of about forty, of gentlemanly bearing, and with an intelligent and benevolent countenance, was the Cavaliere Soldini, a Lombard, and the director of the clerical newspaper.

"Well?" said Záupa.

His visitors smiled, and looked at each other in tacit interrogation. "You speak," said the priest. Then, as his colleague demurred, he explained to Záupa that they were not precisely of the same opinion, and that he should prefer to speak last. Hereupon Soldini yielded, and began his discourse.

"Well, this is how the matter stands. You must know that there is, unfortunately, much truth in the stories that are being circulated concerning our mayor and a certain lady. There is passion on both sides, and a passion that is not silent."

"No, indeed!" the priest interposed. "Anything but silent! Kisses and embraces in the garden, *coram populo!*"

"We may say, *coram nemori et lunae*, if the story be true. But, after all, no one can say how far——"

"That makes no difference," grumbled the priest. "The fact remains, *coram nemori, lunae et hortulano!*"

"Ah, well! To me it does not indeed seem the same thing, but let us proceed. In the first place I wish to state that my wife and I are on friendly terms with the mayor, and also that my wife calls upon Signora Dessalle, with whom she became acquainted in Rome."

Záupa assented obsequiously. "I quite understand," said he.

The priest, who was listening with bowed head, made a significant grimace.

"For my part," Cavaliere Soldini went on, "I shall try to be absolutely impartial and frank in treating this painful subject. No one, as I said before, can possibly know how far matters have gone. My wife, whose insight in such cases is very clear, does not believe the worst, and I also must refuse to do so."

"That is right! That is right!" said Záupa with great satisfaction.

"Simple-minded creatures!" grumbled the priest, and added aloud: "But how about all the rest?"

"Ah, yes! The rest! I am coming to that presently. However, as the very worst is maintained, I should not feel justified in hiding the fact that the most poisonous of these rumours—which were, of course, immediately seized upon and rapidly spread by means of whispered hints full of hypocritical prudence, by the many who take a particular delight in the sins of such as have been esteemed sinless, especially if they be clericals—the most poisonous of these rumours, I say, can all be traced to the Dessalles' kitchen-gardener, who bears an ill-concealed grudge against the head-gardener, that half-anarchist, who is so devoted to the mayor, he having given the man's son a position at the Library. And now let us proceed to examine 'the rest.' The rest is simply this, that last Friday the Dessalles gave a meat *déjeûner* in the garden, to which some foreign friends of theirs were invited, and Maironi was also present."

"Hm! That is certainly a serious matter," Záupa exclaimed at once regretfully and meekly. "But are you sure he ate?"

"Unfortunately there can be no doubt about that," Soldini replied. "And, moreover, gossip began at once, for the kitchen-gardener told a lot of people."

"Think of the scandal!" the priest cried, looking at Záupa.

"I am not surprised," said Záupa. "I was not aware of this circumstance, but I must admit that a change has for some time been coming over the man, and—I regret to say—not a change for the better. His conduct also, in many trivial but unpleasant matters, has not been correct. Therefore it is impossible to go on in this way—quite impossible—especially when we consider the characters of certain of our colleagues."

Then the Cavaliere, after declaring that personally he deeply lamented the Dessalle scandals, but that he considered it most dangerous, most inopportune to use them against the mayor, frankly admitted that Maironi's occupancy of the office was a source of anxiety to all concerned, and that his own opinion differed from that of the worthy abbé only in so far as regarded the best manner of removing this source of anxiety. He himself was convinced that the mayor had wished to bring about a crisis by the stand he had taken in several much talked of matters. Maironi wished to break with the town-council, with the majority, and with the party, but he evidently intended to accomplish this in the way most convenient to himself. He was probably also anxious *de mettre les rieurs de son coté.* Here Záupa and the abbé looked at each other, their eyes saying very plainly: "Do you understand that? I don't." Maironi was, moreover, desirous of withdrawing from office in a manner calculated to reflect unfavourably upon the Catholics, and which should justify, or at least excuse, a future and far more serious rupture, when he should see fit to go over to other views, and other men. Now the Catholics must, in their own interests, carefully avoid playing his game. The rupture must be brought about by means of some purely official question.

"In this way," the sagacious orator concluded, "you will avoid offending his personal sentiments, you will not drive him to the opposite extreme, which would not only mean his own spiritual ruin, but would be a painful blow to the party as well. Should he choose to turn his back upon the Faith after you—acting with prudence and all due respect—shall have brought about his withdrawal from office, he will be injuring himself alone. It will be through no fault of yours, and he will cut but a sorry figure. Indeed, no one would be willing to admit that a question concerning gas, the fixing of the town limits, the proper salary for licensed midwives, or even a blow aimed at his vanity, could justify him in changing both his political and religious views. But unless he is irritated I do not believe he will desert. He is under the spell of a woman. That is a very human weakness, and we Catholics are perhaps wrong in not making sufficient allowance for the sexual frailty of, I was going to say, even the best of men, and the most fervent Christians. Let the spell do its work. These are maladies which, like certain tumours, may not be operated upon successfully until they have reached maturity. But enough of this. At the meeting to-day, you must choose the ground for the crisis. It has occurred to me that you might select the question of raising the salaries of country school-teachers. You assessors must arrange to bring the question before the committee at the next meeting, and it must then be resolved to submit the teachers' demands to the Council with a vote of opposition. You are aware that the mayor has already compromised himself with regard to this matter, through the declarations he made when the demands of the street-sweepers were under discussion. He will tender his resignation, and you will immediately do the same, simply *pro forma,* of course. The Council will be convened to discuss the resignations, and then there will be no need of mincing matters, and the mayor will not be re-elected. *Res finita est!*"

"Yes, my dear sir," Záupa exclaimed. "That will be a most prudent course, a most prudent course!"

"It will not end well," the priest began, making light of Záupa's opinion. His own opinions differed from the Cavaliere's. It was an ugly matter, a very ugly matter, this intrigue with that woman. When there is cause for scandal there is nothing to be gained by speculating as to whether things are or are not as bad as they are represented. Let us admit—for the sake of argument—that this misconduct is to be attributed to a frailty common to all flesh ; but how about the transgression committed in public on Friday ? It might have been overlooked in the case of an ordinary Catholic, but the head of the party ! Had it been an official banquet which the mayor was obliged to attend, there would have been some excuse for him ; he might have obtained a dispensation from the Bishop, or partaken only of such dishes as were not composed of meat, or, as a last resort, he might have abstained from eating. But this had been a purely social gathering, and, moreover, it took place out of doors ! The small table at which the mayor sat could be distinctly seen from the vineyards where the labourers were at work. It was not a simple violation of rules, it was a challenge ! It would be quite as scandalous not to accept the challenge. The *Signor Sindaco* was a diseased member of the Church, and diseased members must be amputated without mercy. It would be true mercy to follow the example of St. Paul, and consign the man and his scarf of office to Satan, that his soul might be saved at the day of judgment ! However, before resorting to such drastic methods the sinner should be summoned to repent ; some one high in authority should admonish him, and then, should he still resist, they must go to him and openly demand his resignation.

" Ah ! " Záupa exclaimed, foreseeing that he himself would be included among those future ambassadors.

"That would be rather harsh treatment! Rather harsh treatment! Don't you think so yourself?"

"Of course," the priest replied. "I am well aware of that."

The Cavaliere here remarked that it was almost four o'clock, and that it would be wiser for them to depart at once, thus avoiding the councillors, who would perhaps urge them to take part in the meeting. This they did not wish to do. Moreover Dr. Záupa was now well posted, and knew how to act. For his part the Cavaliere had simply expressed his opinion; he had desired to discuss it, but did not wish to oblige any one to accept it.

As they were going out the abbé whispered in Záupa's ear: "Are you keeping this meeting a secret?"

Záupa started violently, and answered with a dark frown and uplifted hands: "Most certainly we are!" as if it had been at least a plot to assassinate the Pope.

The priest shrugged his shoulders angrily, and made a gesture that said plainly enough: "Speak out, man!" and left the simple-minded Záupa in a state of such bewilderment as to check the flow of assurances that he was "Your servant, sir!" and the innumerable, jerky bows with which he was wont to accompany a visitor to the door.

II

Before any satisfactory conclusion had been arrived at by the worthy councillors assembled at Casa Záupa for the purpose of discussing the best means of ridding themselves and the party of this most objectionable mayor, a letter marked "Important," and coming from the mayor himself, was handed to the President. The letter ran as follows:

> DEAR SIR,—
>
> I am informed that the councillors of the majority are to meet to-day at your house for the discussion of business relating to the commune. As I have not been invited to attend this meeting, I conclude—without surprise, and without the slightest regret—that the majority is desirous of severing its connexion with the head of the communal administration. I have therefore determined to tender my resignation to the Royal Prefect at once, and I herewith communicate the fact to you, as first-assessor, informing you, at the same time, that I shall not visit my office again.
>
> With cordial greetings, believe me, dear Sir,
>
> Yours faithfully,
>
> P. MAIRONI.

"Hurrah!" cried one of the councillors. "Total eclipse of the mayor!" And all the faces lighted up save that of the sour man. "If he had only sent that rigmarole of his an hour earlier," said he on his way downstairs, "I should not have to eat over-boiled rice for supper!" The others discussed the mayor's love affairs with gaily wagging tongues, and the stairs teemed with what had been with difficulty held in check in the parlour.—What does the Marchesa say? Poor woman, she looks like a ghost!—And the Marchese?—He adapts himself to circumstances.—But has it indeed reached such a point?—It certainly has!—

The same things had been said on the stairs in hushed whispers before the meeting, by those councillors who met at the door and went up together. Thus do tiny rivulets trickle with faint whisperings into a mountain cavern, filling it with their silent waters, which finally overflow together and rush valleywards, repeating the same babblings, but this time in a louder voice.

III

The clouds which had hung above the respectable tiles of Casa Záupa at four o'clock sent down torrents of rain at six. Thunder, lightning, and a high wind tore across the sky from east to west, opening a clear passage for the moon. A total eclipse, to begin at half-past eleven, had been announced, and Maironi was to be at Villa Diedo towards eleven o'clock, and accompany the Dessalles to the top of the neighbouring hill, along which a magnificent road winds like a ribbon, dominating in turn, and sometimes, indeed, at the same time, the boundless east, and the disorderly expanse on the west, encumbered by the twisted roots of the Alps, up to the very base of a slanting flight of more lofty summits.

Shortly after half-past ten he started up the steep and lonely lane that leads from the stables to the villa. The moon was skimming across the tops of the trees which overhang the road from the bank above. He found the garden-gate standing half-open, and entered the thick grove of hornbeams on the left, at the other end of which the gravel of an open space shone in the moonlight. From one side of the grove a dark figure sprang suddenly forward into the white light, and Piero felt himself pressed in Jeanne's arms, felt her eager forehead upon his breast. Thus they remained locked in a long and silent embrace, he drinking in the perfume of her soft, warm hair upon which his lips rested, she holding him close, and nestling her head ever deeper, as if seeking to force open his breast, to hide her whole being in his heart. At last Jeanne told him softly and without changing her position, that her brother was absent from the city ; she said she had at first been overjoyed at this unexpected and fortunate circumstance, and then she had trembled and been so frightened ; her first fear had been that she should not be able to remain alone with him, then, when she hadat last succeeded in getting rid of some troublesome visitors, she had feared he would not come. And she laughed a little joyous laugh, resting there on his breast. Piero made no answer, but taking her head in both hands, he forced her to raise it, and still without speaking, kissed her eagerly on eyes, cheeks and mouth, while Jeanne submitted and indeed returned his kisses, but without warmth. At last she gently removed his hands from her neck, and, in her turn, drawing his head down to her, kissed him upon the forehead, as if to calm his excitement, and whispered : " Now say something to me ! " But the young man, who was still eager, and whose longing had become still more intense, answered only, between two kisses : " I am thirsty ! I am thirsty ! " Then she drew away. " Enough ! " said she resolutely, and ordered him to leave the garden, and to wait outside for a few minutes before ringing the bell, on account of the servants. She would wait for him on the terrace. Maironi obeyed reluctantly.

Five minutes later a footman followed by Piero passed from beneath the dark hornbeams into the moonlight beyond, and raising his face—which was like the face of an ancient Roman—towards the balustrade of the terrace, announced :

"Signor Maironi."

Jeanne was standing behind the balustrade, a small, white cape thrown over her shoulders. "This is good of you!" she said in answer to his respectful salutation. Hat in hand, Piero went up to the terrace with a smile upon his face that was too much like the smile of the woman who was advancing to meet him. It was indeed magnificent in the moonlight, this white marble terrace, jutting out from the first floor of the villa, with its flight of broad steps leading down into the garden, its balustrade which the creeping roses had taken by storm and hidden beneath a tangled glory of dense foliage and great flesh-coloured eyes, long branches swaying in the vagrant breezes of the night. It was magnificent with its surrounding circle of beauty, sweeping from the dark and humble plains on the North to the radiant brightness in the sky above the lighted city; stretching away to the ridge of uplands, close pressed between two long groves of hornbeams, and to the ploughed fields sleeping beneath the moon in the valley on the South.

"Why not stay here?" Piero said in an undertone, as if the innocent words might betray to some inquisitive ear his longing for an hour of delight in that solitary and enchanted spot among the restless roses, which rustled a voluptuous invitation.

"We will remain here for the present," Jeanne replied, and having ordered the footman to bring them some coffee—her favourite beverage as well as Piero's—she went towards some wicker chairs, standing in one corner of the terrace.

"And then we will go," she said softly, throwing herself back with a sigh in a low easy chair against which the roses brushed. In Piero's eyes she saw a light that made her start up suddenly again. "How wicked you are!" said she. "I never think of that!"

He protested with heat that it was not wickedness to love her with his whole soul, with all the blood in his veins, to——

Jeanne checked him with a gesture, and pointed to a lighted, open window, in the villa.

"The maids," said she.

Piero bit his lips, and let his gaze rest long upon her, speaking with his ardent, unswerving eyes. Then he told her that he was no longer mayor, that he had broken for ever with those wretched people; that he felt he was being born into a new life; that he was drunk with the sense of his freedom. Hardly had he uttered the word when he remembered the still unsevered chain that bound him. Jeanne seemed to have had the same thought and could find nothing to say. After a moment of painful silence she mentioned the tiresome visitors who had come out from the town using the eclipse as a pretext for an escapade that should be both "smart" and amusing. To her great grief, poor Jeanne had been obliged to dismiss them. She had pleaded an appointment with friends on the hill-road. As a matter of fact, her brother had left her hoping to return from Venice with an artist friend, in time to watch the eclipse with her, and she had promised to drive up the hill and wait for him at the point where both slopes are visible from the road. The tiresome people had seemed disposed to await her departure. "I am afraid I was not very nice to them," said she. "However," she added, alluding to two ladies of the city who worshipped her in spite of the lukewarmness of her affection for them, "neither of my jealous admirers was present, and the mammas and young ladies of the party had certainly come far more on my brother's account than on mine. Perhaps some of them intended going into total eclipse in pleasant company in the garden or under the hornbeams."

At that moment the "ancient Roman" entered with the coffee.

"I was already aware of what you have told me," said Jeanne. "I was informed of it by the young man you got the place for at the Library. He was half dismayed and half angry. I could see that my visitors knew it also. *Je les ai entendus dire en partant que j'avais les nerfs, et que c'était l'effet de la crise.*"

"We had better walk, don't you think so?" she said presently. "I will send the carriage down to the station and order it to come for us in any case, whether they arrive or not."

She gave her instructions to the footman and rose, as the great, solemn voice of midnight sounded high up on the hill-side, where the Sanctuary showed white against the clear sky. As they were going to walk it was time to put on her hat and gloves.

Maironi followed her into the rectangular hall, whose two longest walls are covered by paintings by Tiepolo, and show, on one side, Iphigenia between her executioners and the sorrowful princes, and on the other, the Greek crews turning towards the ships in which they are about to embark. The room was but dimly lighted, and held an odour of heliotrope and of Cuban cigarettes.

"Let us remain here! Let us remain here!" said the young man, in such a strange voice and with an accent of such ardent supplication that Jeanne, who had started to go to her room, hastened her steps. He sprang after her, following her into the dark corridor leading to the stairway, and threw his arms about her waist. But she tore herself away impetuously and rushed towards the brightly-lighted stairway. She soon came down again accompanied by her maid, and looking grieved.

As soon as the footman had closed the garden-gate behind them Piero apologized. Jeanne did not answer. He stopped abruptly, feeling the blood freeze in his veins. Then Jeanne took his arm, and told him she was not angry only grieved, deeply grieved that she should thus unduely excite his passions ; that her love, which was indeed impulsive and unbounded, but not sensual, should be thus misunderstood. She was pained and astonished that her influence should be such over him, her first real love, while others who had loved her, and perhaps still cherished their unrequited affection for her, had felt themselves purified by her, as it were, and had asked for her love in the name of their moral salvation. She feared, therefore, that he loved her only as a sweet deliverance from his past, which deliverance did not seem to him complete without an irremediable act of mortal offence against that past, an act which should form a sort of material bond between himself and her who had set him free. He tried to interrupt, but Jeanne would not listen to him. If, in the violence of her passion, Jeanne sometimes humbled herself before him like a slave, she now judged him with a lofty independence, with a keenness and frankness that terrified him.

“ Do you no longer love me ? ” said he.

“ Oh ! ” she cried, clinging still tighter to his arm as she pressed close to his side. An exhilarating sweetness invaded his senses.

“ I also have felt your purifying influence,” said he, “ for now indulgence without love would be loathsome to me. At this present moment I feel that I am as pure as you yourself can wish me to be. Try to imagine that I am kissing you on the brow."

Jeanne smiled. "Yes, dear," she said, and continued:

"You must indeed believe me; I am really peculiar in this way. I do not know if it be natural coldness, or pride, or the horrible impression left upon me by my brutal husband, or—what shall I call it?—an æsthetic sense; it may perhaps be the result of all these causes combined. I only know that the idea of the extreme of sensuality fills me with immense repugnance. Perhaps I might bring myself to make a sacrifice in order to satisfy the man I loved, but I am sure I should love him far less afterwards. I feel that I love even you much less at certain times you know of—like a moment ago, for example. Perhaps I am strange, even unique, but this is the case. Besides, there is my brother. I feel like a mother towards my brother, and he has the greatest confidence in my high-mindedness; he adores me as a being superior to all human frailties. It would be terrible for him to discover that I had lowered myself like any ordinary woman. Moreover, I believe he also is of a cold temperament; certainly, he is morbidly sensitive, for a man, not only to all unrefinement of action, but to the slightest word touching certain delicate questions. He has no more religion than I have, but, nevertheless, I am convinced he does not live as other men do. Perhaps he may be influenced somewhat by the religion of his health——"

Jeanne glanced at the moon. "I don't know how I have brought myself to talk to you of these things before the total eclipse," she said.

"To *you?*" said he questioningly, for she had used the formal second person plural.

"Yes, to *you*. Don't you see there some people near us?"

At that moment they were leaving the narrow lane that runs between two walls, to follow the open ridge that leads to the greater heights, where, only a few steps from them, and near the parapet that crowns the brow of the broad square overlooking the city, a party of young men were walking, laughing gaily as they talked.

"Now that he has thrown those hypocrites overboard," said one, raising his voice above the others' chatter, "and all for the pleasure——" (here there followed an indelicate allusion), "I am beginning to respect him, and shall certainly give him my vote."

Near that spot the road from Villa Diedo and the other villas on the hill-side joins the road from the city to the Sanctuary. Maironi, who was deathly pale, turned with his companion towards the shadow of the great horse-chestnuts that stand drawn up in line like a guard of honour, on the left of the broad way. Before and behind them others were coming up the hill to witness the eclipse. They heard a gentleman who was walking in front of them with two ladies, say to his companions: "It would be awful if she should get well now!" Perhaps he had not meant the person of whom both Maironi and Jeanne were thinking, but his dark words struck them like an icy wind. It was, above all, bitter to each to think that the other had heard, and that it was not possible for either to speak, although their very embarrassment was more or less ridiculous. Instinctively and in silence they crossed to the other side of the road. Jeanne broke the silence by saying that her brother had taken it into his head to give a garden-party at Villa Diedo in June, or a fancy-dress ball during the coming winter, and as it would be necessary to cover in the terrace with iron and glass, they must begin to make arrangements very soon. She said she herself was opposed to the plan, but that Carlino's friends, both male and female, even his friends in Florence, were encouraging him in his whim. They were greatly taken by the idea of Tiepolo and the eighteenth century and Tiepolesque costumes. Considering what a gossip-loving place this was, it was to be hoped the party would fall through as the picnic had done. Piero did not seem interested in what she was saying. Presently Jeanne asked, speaking softly because a troop of ladies and young men were climbing the hill in front of them, if it were not probable the town council would re-elect him. No, it was not at all probable. That they might not think he had been moved to take this step by a desire to retaliate or by anger, Piero was going to tender his resignation as town councillor as soon as possible.

"How many things you think about!" said Jeanne. "I think of one thing only."

"I can think of what you mean as intensely as you can, and of other things at the same time," Piero replied.

"And what will you do now?" said Jeanne, smiling. "Will you join the Liberals?"

Maironi did not answer. When they had gone forward a few paces they found themselves in the shadow of the church. Then he would have taken Jeanne's arm, but she demurred.

"I do not care in the least for myself whether they see us or not," said she, "but I am afraid of injuring you."

The young man drew her violently towards him, and she now submitted at once.

"Do not be afraid," said he. "I scorn all they have said, all they are saying now and may say in the future! And pray don't talk to me about the local political parties. And don't talk of this town either, which is becoming more hateful to me every minute! After all, I was not born here, and different blood flows in my veins. Now that I have broken with so many ties, the world is spreading out and lighting up before me in a wonderful way. I tell you I feel like a god in a mud-puddle! Join the Liberals? Gracious heavens! what party could I possibly join here that is not characterized by meanness and pettiness? Look at the clericals! If there is one clerical with whom it is possible to converse it is Soldini, and he does not belong here, he comes from Milan. The Liberals? I know perfectly well they will all flock about me now, and the very thought of this exasperates me already. I know them, and I weigh them! Besides, as yet I have no idea what I shall do. Meanwhile I assure you I am taking my part in life actively enough! I have a feeling that I am being carried forward by fate, but I do not believe that I should ever become what is called a Liberal, even in other surroundings. Liberalism is antiquated. Liberty was once an ideal, but now it can only serve as a weapon. It is more probable you may see me a Socialist!"

"No, no!" Jeanne exclaimed, but without great warmth.

"Ah, not a Socialist with the Socialists we have here, you know! Perhaps not even with those of Milan and Turin, although they are better. Certainly never with either the ignorant, the dishonest or the greedy."

"Or with the others either!"

"Why not?"

Piero was aware that Carlino Dessalle was a bitter adversary of Socialism, but he had never noticed that Jeanne shared her brother's sentiments. She did not, indeed, share his hatred of the doctrine, but she was sceptical, profoundly sceptical.

"Because it is a useless movement," said she. "The world wags as it is destined to wag. These theories are simply dreams. Besides, I am sure you would never come to the fore in such a party."

He protested so hotly that Jeanne was frightened. "No, no! Pray forgive me! Be quiet, do!" She entreated him to stop protesting, not to spoil this hour of happiness, to speak of love, of love only; and her voice caressed him like the touch of gentle hands. He yielded, but his passion mastered him once more as it had done at the villa. He wished to leave the main road and follow a shadowy path that leads out of it a few steps beyond the church. Jeanne would not consent to this, and Piero insisted almost harshly. "Now I shall simply take you in my arms and carry you whither I will!" But she persevered in her resistance, and drew him forward.

"Would you have screamed?" said he.

"No, I should have bitten you!"

He was silent. When they had proceeded a few paces Jeanne, continuing aloud a conversation that had begun in silence, asked him if he had indeed broken completely with his faith also.

"I believe so," said he.

Jeanne smiled. "What do you mean by 'I believe so'?"

He endeavoured to explain the strange expression. "You see, my soul is still so enveloped in the clouds of dust arising from the collapse of so much within me, that I cannot yet tell what has fallen and what is still standing. I think, I am almost sure, that I still believe in God, but not in the God I was taught to worship. I buried that God at Praglia. He was already lying half dead within me, but I was still held in the trammels of my old mental habits. Who knows! If all Catholics were like one old priest I know perhaps I should not have lost my faith! And yet even he . . . To tell me I must not judge the Catholic Church by a few hundred individuals, and it never occured to me to answer that the whole Catholic Church is becoming inanimate, that all is antiquated in her, from the words of the Vatican to those of the humblest country chaplain! Once I thought that perhaps another St. Francis, another St. Augustine would come. Now I know neither will come."

"I am sorry you have lost your faith," said Jeanne.

"Why?"

"Because I know how sad it is not to have anything firm, anything positive within one!"

"Have you nothing firm within you?"

"Nothing, save love!"

"Do you not even believe there may be another way?"

"No," Jeanne answered with a sigh.

Both were silent for a time. Suddenly Jeanne exclaimed. "And the moon?" They raised their eyes, almost expecting the eclipse would be over. The shadow covered about one third of the orb. They looked to see what time it was. The carriage would be coming very soon now.

"I hope they will not have arrived," said Jeanne. She added that the Venetian painter had once been in love with her, and she confessed that although she had never returned his affection, she had, at one time, thought him very amusing, and had enjoyed the mad things he persisted in saying to her, in spite of her rebuffs. Now he no longer said mad things to her, and she found him tiresome. Maironi pretended to be convinced that she regretted the man's foolish talk, and feigned jealousy. They laughed together, laughed joyously about the lovers Jeanne had had; about Captain Reggini, who was tiresome in spite of his wit, on account of the attitude of jealousy he dared to assume; they laughed about an elderly, married man of the town, who pined for the laurels of a libertine, and was anything but an expert in that calling. He had dared to make some bold overtures, and having received a sharp lesson, had taken to the "Bridge of Sighs."

A carriage was coming up behind them. White horses. Then it could not be the Dessalles' carriage. Jeanne and Maironi drew aside into the shadow of a wall. From that point the road sloped steeply downwards, and the coachman put the horses to a walk. It was a stage, laden with ladies and officers, and a noisy astronomical discussion was going on concerning the Colonel's nose, Captain Reggini swearing that he could see the shadow of that nose upon the mountains of the moon, just above the volcano of Desolation, while some one else swore that what he saw was the shadow of the frontal appendix of——! Horrified protests, exclamations, guffaws, laughter, satire, horses and stage all passed on at last. Jeanne believed she had heard her husband's name.

"I do so wish I could go away from here!" said she.

"Where would you go?"

"Where no one knows us."

He understood, pressed her arm tighter, and asked:

"How about your brother?"

Jeanne sighed. "It would be quite sufficient to tell him that after heavy rains the water stagnates in the little valley 'del Silenzio,' and infects the air somewhat. But I will never do that. He is too fond of Villa Diedo, and has already spent such a mountain of money there."

At that moment the Dessalles' horses came up at a slow trot. The landau was empty; the "ancient Roman" got off the box and told Jeanne that no one had arrived. She and Maironi entered the carriage. Without stopping to consider, Jeanne, who did not wish to meet the stage, proposed that they return to Villa Diedo and await the completion of the eclipse on the terrace. Maironi murmured a "thank you!" so full of fervour that she at once regretted her proposal, but she did not venture to alter it.

It was only then as they were ascending the steep hill behind the large-eared majesty of the coachman and footman that Jeanne and Maironi contemplated the scene of their idyll, the tiny white villas, growing ever paler against the shadowy hills, the new trembling of small stars, rising out of the depths of the sky. Waves of warm air and the odour of the acacia in full bloom passed over them, alternating with waves of cool air and the odour of damp woods.

"Your country is indeed beautiful!" said Jeanne.

"It is not my country."

"How is that?"

Maironi was amused by Jeanne's tone. She seemed offended and incredulous.

"Masterful, as usual!" said he. "You are never willing to admit a mistake!" She also smiled, and breathed "Naughty boy!" upon his face. Then, speaking aloud, she asked him where his country was, and added softly: "I know, but I had forgotten." Piero told her of the house in which he was born, of the lonely lake, the great, stern mountains of Valsolda. Just then the landau reached the top of the hill, and the horses broke into a trot.

"If we were only there in a boat, we two alone!" said Piero. "Shall we ever be there, floating alone in a little boat, in the shadow of a bay, upon the swelling waters?"

He passed his arm behind Jeanne's shoulders, felt her lovely person bend forward a little way and then sink back against his arm, pressing it deliciously, now more now less, in answer to his every movement. They spoke no more save in this way. The horses trotted briskly; sweet odours were fanned across the road from the masses of blossoms on either side. As the moonlight diminished a voluptuous languor encompassed all things, and all things grew paler and more pale in anticipation of the hidden conjunction of two orbs that was to take place in the surrounding gloom.

Only a thin, silver rim of the moon's reddish globe was still shining when they once more ascended the dark terrace. In the restless air, the swaying of the roses, indistinctly heard, sounded like voices of desire and pain. The sprays seen but indistinctly, waving from side to side, seemed like the arms of staggering blind men. As he leaned forward to turn the reclining-chair towards the west, where the moon was setting, Piero brushed Jeanne's shoulder with his lips, murmuring "Dear gloom!" "But I love the light," Jeanne replied. At the same moment there flashed across his mind in a cold and fleeting light, the words: *dilexerunt tenebras*. Enough, enough! He wished he had not even thought of them. He sat down beside Jeanne and said aloud, in case any one should be listening; "Now, Signora, we can play we are astronomers," and he took her hand. "You were unjust," he murmured, "bitterly unjust, when you said there is cold purpose beneath my ardour. Never say so again!" Jeanne carried his hand to her lips.

Silence, the breath of roses, the gentle swaying of branches and human sighs, full of the Ineffable.

"Is it not too cold and damp for you here?" said Piero, at last. "Would it not be better——?"

Jeanne smiled. "I think it would be better for you to leave me now, my friend."

"Good-bye, then."

"No, no!"

She herself had told him to go, and now she would not allow it. They both laughed very softly. "Yes, yes," said she growing serious, "you must really go." "Without a kiss? Without a single kiss?" Piero whispered, and she rose and went into the hall, he following her. "Now I will summon the footman to accompany you to the gate," said she, and placing her finger on the button of the electric bell, she turned towards the young man, and offered him her lips.

* * * * *

He went down the hill as one in a dream, conscious of nothing save of that act, of those lips, with no thought save that he could think of nothing, wish for nothing, that in this happy state he was descending into the depths of the River of Life, at once so impetuous and so gentle. As he entered Casa Scremin he asked himself if it would be possible for him to go on living with these people. While he was taking off his coat he thought with disgust of the fair-haired lady's maid. How delightful no longer to feel the brute without love within him, to be thus transfigured in the life of the body! He sat down on the bed, and once more recalled the most delicious moments of that night, from the silent embrace beneath the hornbeams to the kiss in the hall. He also pondered Jeanne's strangest words, delighting in and proud of the love of a creature so beautiful, so strange and deep, and asking himself at the same time, now that he could reflect calmly, if there be not in her, together with so much love, a secret nucleus of pride, of ideas stronger than love itself, which was invincible. And was not her attachment to her brother excessive, almost an offence? But, after all, what love, what immense, impetuous, tender love, even within those limits! What unique love, what spiritual intensity of love mingled with the most exquisite and delicate desire of the senses! He returned eagerly to the momory of the silent embrace, the sweet mouth. Ah!

He roused himself and prepared to go to bed. There was something new lying on the pedestal, just as on the night of the temptation. Not flowers this time, but a sealed letter with the simple address: *Piero*, in the Marchesa's hand. He tore it open without noticing a little envelope that fell from it, and read as follows:

> "Praised be the Lord who sends us consolation at last! This evening, after ten o'clock, the assistant physician from the Asylum came here, and brought the enclosed card with Elisa's writing upon it."

Piero paused and shuddered; then he sought for the little envelope and picked it up. It contained a small square of paper across which the mad woman's hand had traced in large, uneven letters, the words :

I SUFFER.

Out of the depths of the palace the old clock struck three. Then once more silence reigned, that awful silence of conscious things. Piero, seated on the bed with the letter in his hand, gazed at it, half dazed ; looked at the little square of paper, and then fixed his eyes on the letter once more. He read the doctor's words of encouragement over and over again, read of a Mass that was to be celebrated the next morning at the Cathedral. Finally he let his dull eyes rest upon the words scrawled across the card in large letters. Conflicting sentiments of remorse, of terror, of hope that was sinful, and which he recognized as such ; conflicting visions of possible events, which must bring about some strange drama, were warring within him, darkening his soul. Little by little, as he studied the terrible words still so full of the shadows of insanity, he began to find dreary relief in the thought that those shadows would probably conquer at last, and he assured himself over and over again that this judgment was the result of dispassionate reasoning, and not the voice of cruel hope. The light of the candle died out at early dawn ; from the depths of the palace the old clock struck four, and then silence reigned once more, the awful silence of conscious things.

IV

When Maironi was gone Jeanne sent the footman to bed. She rang for her maid, and sent her to bed also. Then she went out to the terrace, shining white in the light of the reanimate moon. She returned to the dark corner among the warm foliage of the roses, stretching herself once more upon the reclining-chair, and smiled to herself, in her great happiness. She had never loved before meeting Maironi, and had never wished to love. Not one of her many adorers had known how to awaken in her soul the sense of her profound femininity. This sense was only half awakened even now. The warmth of the spirit had not, as yet, passed into her body. Her desires did not extend beyond the continual presence and the passionate caresses of her beloved, the possession of his soul, and the right to encircle his neck with her arms, to rest her forehead upon his shoulder in moments when silence is better than words. Beyond these transports and caresses, these fleeting kisses and the feeling of the dear arm about her shoulders, her repugnance began. Her ecstasies were not marred by the slightest fear or remorse. The daughter of parents who, though unbelieving, respected religion, she had passed through the ascetic fervours of convent life. Thus the spirit in her very blood, the consciousness of her own intellectual superiority over those who had led her towards piety, the critical tendency of her mind, her reading, the conversation of irreligious but highly cultured men, the well-known unbelief of her parents, who, nevertheless, sent her to Mass and to the Sacraments, and made her presents of prayer-books, all these causes combined had brought her to a sort of serene fatalism, from the summit of which the Christian dogmas, God Himself, and the immortality of the soul appeared to her as so many pleasant delusions, noble, indeed, and even useful to such as did not possess in their own nature—as did she herself—a sense of moral dignity, at once restraining and stimulating. Her pride, her desire for the approbation of others, those vague moral ideals that with her took the place of faith, inspired her with a disgust for adultery, but not with remorse for a love which, satisfied in the way she wished, only filled her soul with kindly sentiments. She knew she was not depriving Piero's wife of anything, and her scepticism concerning sentimental delusions, her strong, clear understanding of reality, would not admit of remorse for an offence which, not being felt, was no offence.

The pitiful image of the poor mad woman never came to trouble her conscience. She had indeed once reflected that Elisa's mother would suffer terribly if she knew, but she believed firmly in the Inevitable, and such sorrow as this was part of it. Even love itself sprang from the Inevitable. Why had she fallen in love with Maironi ? For his qualities of mind or face ? No, but for a Something in his eyes. Many indeed, had spoken to her of this young man, who was so intelligent and cultured, so generous, pious and unhappy, and had inspired her with much curiosity to know him, particularly to ascertain if he still loved his wife. But it was only that mysterious Something that had enslaved her. Was she then one of the many who are at once attracted if a man who is neither old, ugly nor coarse, but look twice at them ? This was certainly not the case ; the conversation of many men had been pleasing to her ; she had enjoyed the admiration of many, and had not always been above a mild flirtation, but at the very first meeting with Maironi she had felt the unexpected hand of Fate. At that moment she had become a slave to the Inevitable.

Love was inevitable, the pain it might cause other human beings was inevitable also, and did not therefore fill her with remorse but only with pity. Beneath the intoxication of Maironi, who was going down the hill with her kiss upon his lips, a bitter leaven was gathering, silently and unobserved. Beneath Jeanne's intoxication there lay the cold and hidden nucleus of her scepticism, her clear vision of the eternal whirlwind in which her love and her conscience, like all other loves, all other consciences, would soon be dissolved. This was the supremely Inevitable, and did not trouble her, but rather intensified the joy of the present hour.

She believed she would not to be able to sleep that night, and she was content to watch the setting moon, to inhale the fragrance of the roses, to think of him. How could she have let him go without asking when he would come again? She caught sight of his gloves, lying forgotten upon a chair. Oh, what if he should come back for them presently? She drew herself up and listened. What folly! She determined to send him the gloves with a note in the morning. Taking them up joyously, she kissed them again and again, then smiled at herself. Pausing, she put her hand into one of the gloves and smiled at herself once more, smiled at her chagrin at finding them so large! She could have sworn Piero's hands were small. A ring at the bell! It must be he!

* * * * *

It was not Maironi but Carlino, who had arrived by carriage with four friends; the distinguished deputy Berardini, the great violoncellist Lazzaro Chieco, the gay Venetian painter Fusarin, and a certain Fanelli of Siena, a critic of art and literature, very young and fast, and as impudent as a Florentine street-urchin. They had started from Venice by train, but had left it to take a drive of thirty kilometres, and enjoy to the full this warm, May night, and the eclipse. They were followed by the driver with Chieco's violoncello. Great was their astonishment at finding Jeanne on the terrace at that hour. She was acquainted only with Fusarin, her former mad adorer. But it was Chieco who came forward first with wide-spread arms, hat in hand.

"Divine lady, do not notice these good-for-nothings, who are not worthy of your attention. Only I am worthy of it; I, Lazzaro Chieco, chamber-violoncellist, or rather ante-chamber violoncellist, to the Almighty!"

"Carlino!" cried Jeanne, laughing, while the others entreated her with mock gravity not to heed the master, who had grown childish. "Are you not going to present me? Whatever are you doing?"

Carlino was coming up the steps of the terrace backwards, and very slowly. "Excuse me, excuse me!" said he. "Wait a moment! I learned this in Venice! It is splendid! It is good for the lungs to go upstairs backwards. What a delightful sensation!"

Fusarin and Fanelli seized him and dragged him up by main force. while he cried: "Better still! Better still!" Meanwhile Berardini was begging Jeanne not to class him with these vagabonds. He had drunk only water for supper, whereas they——! And he made the hypocritical gesture of feigned ignorance. Meanwhile Carlino, having re-adjusted his collar and cuffs, his cravat and coat collar, proceeded to introduce his friends.

"For the love of heaven, let us not stoop to these commonplaces!" exclaimed the honourable deputy. "Signora, I have seen you ere this in my dreams, and I trust you may have seen me. These people here may call me Berardini. Your brother, who despises me, calls me—'the Deputy Berardini'; Fusarin, who hates me, calls me—'Commendatore Berardini.'"

"*Fiol d'un can!*" grumbled Fusarin. "Sly dog! How careful he is to trot out all those titles of his!"

"Do not heed these fellows," the honourable one went on. "You and I understand each other."

"Signora," said Fanelli, "I will allow myself to be presented, being the most respectable of these four friends of your brother's, which, indeed is not saying much!"

Presently Jeanne looked anxiously at Carlino. She was, of course, delighted to see his friends, but—— Chieco forestalled her in what she was about to say.

"Never fear, dear lady! We are not provincials like those tiresome fellow-citizens of yours, who are now snoring away down there in the swamp. You need not worry about putting us to bed. You are the one who must sleep, and we will be your dreams to-night. I came here because your brother tells me he has a splendid, old *clavecin*, and, moreover, I wished to see if I could fall in love with you, and if you could help falling in love with me. These other ragmuffins form my suite. Very well then, now we are going to have some music, and, if possible at this hour, we should like three or four cups of weak tea with milk. Fusarin and your brother will hold a consultation concerning the Tiepolesque ball you are thinking of giving; my compatriot Berardini will empty out another sackful of his nonsense; I will make myself generally delightful, and at sunrise the entire dream will vanish into the East in a landau!"

The servants lost their night's rest, but the visit was indeed like a dream. The electric light shone in the great hall and in the four smaller rooms that surround it, all admirably decorated with frescoes by Tiepolo, in honour of Homer, Virgil, Ariosto and Tasso. Upon the walls loomed the great, living figures of the heroes, superb in the harmony of movement and repose; there were princes in gorgeous cloaks with plebeian faces, the fleshy and glowing nudities of peasant princesses, the colonnade of Aulis, the loggias of Carthage, the Greek tents, the rocks of the Isle of Calypso and of the Ebudae, and misty backgrounds of sky and sea. A warm discussion took place because Berardini and Chieco were wild with admiration of the frescoes, while Fanelli, behind his eye-glass, was coldly and sarcastically critical. He picked flaws and pointed out the scandalous inaccuracies of the drawing, until Chieco called him an "ugly monkey," and Fusarin assailed him furiously.

"What ails you any way, Master Faultfinder? Can't you let the poor old fellow who daubed these walls alone? You had better devote your attention to scribbling seven hundred articles a week, in that accursed 'suggestive' vein of yours, with your colouring and your goodness knows what all that is so 'highly charged with modernity'! You blame Tiepolo for painting big knees, and I blame the Almighty for giving you such a brazen face!"

Trlin! Trlin! Trlin! Carlino was summoning them with the *clavecin* from the Homer room, while Jeanne called: "Music! Music!" "Enough! Enough! Music!" they all cried in chorus. The whole party hastened to the Homer room, all save Chieco, who was taking his violoncello out of its case. As a certain Signor Bach, a certain Signor Haydn, a certain Signor Marcello and other bewigged personages with rapiers, silk stockings and diamond buckles were about to appear upon the scene, their reception must be a gay one. Champagne! Fanelli drank gaily to the most "thrillingly modern" of all the goddesses of Villa Diedo, Berardini improvized a grotesque tirade upon the goddess Diana and drank to her divine brother, Apollo Dessalle! Chieco, raising his glass towards the fresco representing Ulysses standing on the sea-shore, lost in thought, offered to console the gentle, sad, and lovely Calpyso, whose bare neck and shoulders are seen rising out of the waves, and proceeded to drink to her and to her dressmaker. Fusarin drank to the "venerable Diedo, poor soul, who built this shanty!" And upon Jeanne's seeking to prevent the opening of too many bottles of champagne, Carlino proposed her health in her capacity of gendarme: "*Pas à Jeanne d'Arc, mais a Jeanne d'armes*!"

Then Bach came upon the scene, the God Bach, as Chieco called him, while he abused Carlino for not providing wigs, rapiers, embroidered waistcoats, knee-breeches and silk stockings for all his guests, in a villa possessed of such a *clavecin*, where Tiepolo and Bach reigned. "Let us swear to come to your ball thus!" said Berardini. They took the oath, and then Bach began his little, serene discourse. A crystalline, tinkling, childish voice mingled with the voice of a jolly, red-nosed, old grandfather. Chieco played the violoncello like a demi-god, and Carlino handled the *clavecin* so skilfully that his companion often cried: "Bravo, bravo!" The delicious, eighteenth century perfume softened all hearts. Jeanne sighed. Fusarin once more felt the *veteris vestigia flammae*, and ventured to caress her hand surreptitiously, whereupon Jeanne rose with a faint, tell-tale smile, and went to turn the pages for her brother. Fanelli guessed what had happened, and grinned mischievously at Fusarin, who flung himself upon a windowsill and puffed incense at the stars from his Manilla cigar. Berardini scented an intrigue, met Jeanne's lovely eyes twice, quite by accident, and quivered at the thought of a gallant adventure. Jeanne felt her own power of fascination and gloried in it on behalf of him to whom she belonged in spirit. And Bach the courtier, went about flattering each and every one with his gentle sayings, and his soft laughter, until he finally withdrew with a graceful bow, and a sweep of his three-cornered hat. Berardini applauded loudly, and immediately found an opportunity of whispering to Jeanne in French, that he had not heard anything ; that he had seen her alone; that at the coming ball the characters of the frescoes must be reproduced, and that she must be Calypso, while he would be the sea ! "*L'amer ?*" said Fanelli, breaking in upon this speech. "*Il l'est toujours. N'en goûtez pas !*" And he laughed merrily. Silence for the entrance of the most excellent and noble Marcello. Chieco summoned Jeanne.

"Lovely one, do not listen to the twaddle of those two. Let us get to work. But don't turn too rapidly as you did just now. And you, over there, are to behave yourselves, miserable atheists that you are, for when I play Marcello I believe in God ! *Avanti !* Begin !"

It was the fourth sonata for violoncello and piano. After a trill on the 'cello the pious Chieco, drawing his bow across the strings with powerful strokes cried : "This world is not to be endured !" and the music soared upwards, while the mighty chords followed close one upon the other. "Without Calypso," Fanelli whispered.

In fact Fusarin, carried away by the violence of the music, had fixed his ardent eyes on Jeanne, and was beseeching her with every vibration of the violoncello. The *clavecin* seemed but ill-adapted to so much passion. How could Beethoven have conceived his sonatas without conceiving the modern piano at the same time? Carlino maintained that Beethoven's music had created the modern piano, just as in organisms it is not the organ that creates its power, but the power that creates the organ. They went on to Corelli, but Carlino was tired; at the second page he made a mistake in the time, whereupon Chieco called him a thief and an assassin, and having lost his companion entirely at the second "a capo," he jumped to his feet crying: "We shall meet again in time for coffee! We shall meet again in time for coffee!" While the others were laughing at the guilty Carlino, Chieco drew Jeanne aside and said something to her that provoked a quick gesture of indignation on her part. "It is nothing! Nothing!" cried the impudent, clownish fellow. "I can say with my Venetian boatman when I ask him if it is going to rain: 'Nothing, nothing! The mountains would like to, but the sea will not!'" And with that the whole party passed into the Iphigenia room.

As they were leaving, the music-room Berardini detained Jeanne a moment.

"You take a great interest in a certain gentleman who aspires to become a senator, do you not?" said he, with glowing eyes.

"Not much! Not much!" Jeanne answered laughing. She had indeed made some efforts on Marchese Zaneto's behalf when she was anxious to gain the Scremins' good-will, fearing their suspicions might be aroused by Maironi's frequent visits, and that they might influence him against her, undecided as he then was. Now that she was sure of him she left the matter of the senatorship entirely to Carlino, who was beginning to enjoy the intrigue.

"Not much perhaps, but still just a little," Berardini replied. "The thing is not impossible. There are, however, several important points. First of all, the Marchese's son-in-law must resign his post as mayor, and give up his party, or, if he cannot bring himself to desert, he must at least, cease all active opposition."

"That is already done," Jeanne assured him.

"Ah! So much the better. Another thing, Signor Maironi owns much property in the province of Brescia, and his agents have always recommended abstinence from voting; now, at the next elections, these agents must bring their men up to vote for the government candidate. Then a means must really be found of checking the rumours that are circulating concerning the Marchese's financial position. Finally—and this is most important, because the government does not wish to be compromised—a certain influential statesman whose name I have communicated to Carlino, and who will undoubtedly be carefully sounded by the Prime Minister, must not be opposed to him. I believe that if these conditions are respected, the matter may be considered settled. Are you quite satisfied? May I hope for a slight recompense?"

Here Berardini lowered his voice, and, with a silly leer, sought to take Jeanne's hand. She, however, was quick to turn her back upon him.

When Chieco saw the crestfallen deputy enter the Iphigenia room behind the frowning lady he began to cry out once more: "Bless your heart, my master! Nothing, nothing! The mountains would like to, but the sea will not!"

Jeanne joined the others and began to make tea. Carlino and Fusarin talked of the coming ball; discussed the question of requesting the guests to appear in the costumes of the frescoes, of thus uniting in one hall, Iphigenias and Rinaldos, Agamemnons and Armidas, Medoras and Didos. They discussed the plan of covering in the two terraces of the villa with iron and glass, in order to make one a vestibule and the other a supper-room. Carlino could not bear the idea of "odious iron," and Fusarin maintained that it might be completely hidden by tapestries and draperies, while that little snob Fanelli dropped his pinch of worldly wisdom into the conversation from time to time, and paraded his acquaintance with celebrated halls and the great poets of decoration. Carlino favoured the idea of using tapestries simply because he had some splendid *Cinquecento* specimens, for which he had no room at Villa Diedo. But he felt sure they must have become perfect hot-beds of germs. They might spread some horrid, sixteenth century disease! How should he go to work to get them properly disinfected? Would their sublime skin bear an application of corrosive sublimate?

"Nonsense!" cried the witty Fusarin. "How about that great, long beard of Calcante's Capuchin, and the greasy jacket that miserable barber has on, who is kneeling with that filthy rag in his hand, ready to catch Iphigenia's blood? And all the long cloaks of those Greek princes, who look as if they loved tobacco and strong drink, do you fancy they are not full of germs? For my part, I assure you I should be delighted to die of sixteenth century pest! It would be splendid! Something new, at least!"

A tilting match of mad sayings concerning life and death followed this outburst. Berardini jested and laughed as bold-facedly as possible, and Jeanne found it hard to remember that she should really treat him rather badly, so little had his impudence affected her, and so often had other men, both the stupid and the intelligent, been equally bold with her. He declared that he had no consciousness of his existence, but only of his apparent existence, and that this was a balm for all ills, for all fear, and in no wise curtailed his faculty for enjoyment—on the contrary, it enhanced it, because it removed, or at least, reduced to a simple appearance, that difference between life and death which terrifies the masses. Fanelli took his part against the artists, who alone attempted to defend the absolute with a fusillade of anything but metaphysical arguments. Jeanne listened in silence as she served the tea, but her eyes, her eyebrows, her brow, even her shoulders at times, approved or disapproved as the case might be. Her disapproval of Chieco and Fusarin was most pronounced, as if she felt especially vexed that those two should be on the wrong side. Fusarin was the first to notice this, and he exclaimed angrily:

"Of course! I am always wrong!"

"Certainly!" Jeanne exclaimed, her face aflame. "You can't help seeing it, the thing is so evident. Every one of our certainties is, after all, a certainty only for ourselves, a relative certainty, and a belief in the possession of any absolute certainty is a pure delusion!"

Fanelli and Berardini clapped their hands.

"Perhaps I am here," said Carlino, "and perhaps I am not here. My happiness consists in not knowing. But pray observe, my dear Jeanne, that you appear to me to be taking up the cudgels not so much against Chieco and Fusarin as against my sister's secret opposition! I hope I make my meaning quite clear."

"Nonsense!" said she, and shrugged her shoulders. Then she bestowed a smile upon Chieco who asked her for a delusion of tea, half a delusion of milk, three delusions of sugar, and six or seven delusions of *gauffrettes*, for perhaps he had supped at half-past ten, and perhaps he had not. Fusarin, more in love than logical, swallowed the certainty that there is no certainty with his tea, and contented himself with grumbling to Jeanne: "If you are not here, I don't want to be here either, by Jove!"

* * * * *

They took their departure at dawn to Jeanne's great relief, and she went to bed mortally tired, but happy to be at liberty to think of him, of him alone, in perfect peace! She asked herself: "Is he dreaming of me now?" And then she laughed at herself, at this conventional romanticism which we get from books and which passes into our blood. No, his dream was perhaps of the town-hall, or some other silly thing. She herself would have liked to dream of the unknown lake of Valsolda, in the moonshine, of being in a boat with him. She closed her eyes and tried to compose herself to sleep and this dream; she tried to see in her mind's eye, the lake and the mountains of which she had no idea. She could picture to herself only the boat, his caresses, and could hear his loving voice, but she could not go to sleep thus. Then she began to think what a bad name some spiteful person, perhaps one of the fast men she had repulsed or perhaps her husband himself, must have given her, that men who did not know her should dare to be so bold with her. And she thought of Berardini's speech, and of Marchese Zaneto, of the influential statesman with whom she would have liked to become acquainted in order to present him to Maironi, that he might combat in him those socialistic tendencies which were so displeasing to her, which seemed dangerous and ill-suited to his delicate and mystical nature, to be simply the fruit of his imagination. Not a single shudder, not the slightest anxiety came to warn her that at that same moment her lover, sleepless, despairing and motionless, was staring at a spectre.

CHAPTER IV

THE COMMENDATORE'S COFFEE

I

MARCHESA NENE, clad in black, with stooping shoulders, her waxen face wearing a stern expression, her hands clasping a large prayer-book, entered the special chapel in the Cathedral in which she had desired a Mass to be said, in thanksgiving for the light of hope that had appeared above that sad asylum which was never mentioned. Maironi followed her. The chapel was empty, the candles not yet lighted, and the altar still covered. But when an acolyte appeared and began to uncover the altar and light the candles, the few dark figures scattered among the benches in the one broad nave, moved towards the chapel. Two of the Marchesa's humble friends, who looked like two little, old, female priests, shrivelled, and clad in dark garments, approached her. "We are so glad! We have heard!" they said, and having bestowed a slight and circumspect bow upon Piero, seated themselves on the opposite bench. The sour man happened to be there also, for he was in the habit of going to Mass every morning. The wife of Soldini the journalist was also present, a handsome woman with white hair and bright eyes, who bowed discreetly to the Marchesa without approaching her. There were also two old beggars. Last to enter the chapel, with a heavy tread, was a little grey old man, in a voluminous overcoat; the little old man who controlled the destiny of Zaneto Scremin as well as of many others—the Commendatore. Being very near-sighted, he did not at once notice either the Marchesa or Maironi, Signora Soldini or the sour man, with all of whom he was acquainted. He would have knelt humbly upon the steps of a confessional, had not Signora Soldini, moved by natural courtesy, and the two beggars, moved by the courtesy of the mendicant, hastened to make room for him. Signora Soldini whispered to the new-comer that she must beg for a few moments' speech with him outside the church after Mass. At this the sour man's brow became clouded, and his judgment of his fellow-men more harsh than ever, for he also was bent upon the capture of the Commendatore on leaving the church, with the intention of exposing to him certain business affairs of his own. The Commendatore bowed to the lady, with a faint smile of assent. Only when Mass was half over did he suspect that the man standing so erect beside the old lady with the wrinkled and waxen face was Piero Maironi. This discovery distracted his attention from the Mass for such a length of time that he felt he had been guilty of venial sin, of which, however, the purity of the cause was an attenuant, for he had a great liking for the ex-mayor, and could have wished to see him following a better path. He would gladly have helped to place his feet on such a path, and was much pleased to see him in this place and this company, and he cast about in his mind for a pretext of speaking to him after Mass, that he might keep in touch with him.

Very early that morning Piero had sought out his mother-in-law, for he longed to know what the physician from the asylum had really said. This was a difficult matter with an informant so awkward, so slow of speech as the Marchesa, who was rendered still more awkward, still more slow by her sense of duty which forced her to tell the truth, and her desire not to tell the whole truth. She would have liked Piero to content himself with the words the invalid had traced; she wished him to enjoy them, without thought of anything else; and she answered all his questions ramblingly, disjointedly, only to return over and over again, to that scrap of paper, and always with renewed longing and satisfaction. With his knowledge of the Marchesa, of the involution of her mental capacities, of the chaos that enveloped them, Piero concluded that the flash of consciousness apparent in the painful words had vanished again immediately. Presently his mother-in-law said, with her usual apparent simplicity: "Come, it is time to start," as if she had been ignorant of Piero's new mode of life, for ever since Praglia he had abandoned all religious practices, and this from a sentiment of honesty. Taken thus unawares, Piero had not at the moment been able to find an excuse for not going, and he dared not wound the old lady, for whom, after all, he felt much veneration, and so he had accompanied her to the Cathedral.

Exhausted with his long watch, with all the agony he had suffered through his imagination, his head was full of sleep, of stupor and of weariness; his heart seemed benumbed. Even the passion that had triumphed lay quiet within him, as if it had burnt out. He felt only hatred of himself, of this sacred place, of having to remain there against his will. The sour man's surreptitious glances exasperated him, as did also the contrite faces of these worshippers, stupidly prostrating themselves, as it seemed to him, each before a tiny mirror, in which each contemplated the tiny God of his or her own intellect. It irritated him to think that those two little old women, Signora Soldini and the Commendatore were probably commenting in their hearts on his presence in church. Even his mother-in-law's fervent praying seemed to him simply extreme weakness. While he was thus yielding to the sinful promptings of his own perversity and hardening his heart to every one and everything, the celebrant preceded by his acolyte entered the chapel. Piero recognized Don Giuseppe Flores. This was an unexpected meeting, and it vexed him. He would have preferred some pompous, obnoxious priest. He could not possibly pour out upon Don Giuseppe all the irritation, all the contempt that was filling him with bitterness; and now he could not, he would not look upon that face with a longing for light and peace, as he had once done, out there in the lonely villa. But neither could he close his ears to the grave, sweet voice, which brought back to his memory the rural solitude surrounding the silent villa, the little room, their talk, as they sat side by side on the red sofa, the pious words, the holy lips that had rested a moment upon his hair. If, during his former periods of temptation, his will-power had been exhausted in the struggle to resist without foregoing the sweetness of these temptations, a similar state of paralysis of his will now rendered it impossible for him to drive those importunate and disturbing memories from him. He could not prevent his senses from following that grave and sweet voice; he could not banish from his mind the vision of Don Giuseppe seated beside him on the red sofa, his broad thoughtful brow, his glowing eyes and those burning words that might have been spoken by the Holy Spirit. And so, as he listened to the celebrant and contemplated the images in his own mind, he began to be conscious of a dull ache deep down in his breast and extending towards the heart, like a pain that is generated, spreads and deepens under unrelaxing pressure. It was a silent pain that spoke neither of its origin nor of its nature, but which spread and deepened ever, and in which torment and bitter exhaustion were mingled with exasperation against this pressing, unrelenting Force.

When the celebrant began to read the Gospel, Piero, absorbed in the sound rather than in the sense of the words, became conscious of a change in that sound. In uttering the words of our Lord the celebrant, filled with trembling love, united himself in spirit with Jesus. That voice, colourless enough in expression, almost faltering indeed, but full of soul, told of deep consciousness of his lofty mission, of his sense of unworthiness, and of the predominance in his breast of the divine over the human. Piero could not resist turning his head to gaze upon the solemn humility of the well-known face, that face with its antique outline, and he felt his inward distress gradually change to dark unrest, and then become a violent commotion. He was filled with terror, and steeled himself against himself with all the force of his now re-animate will-power, and thus at last, silenced the tumult within him. That he might not again lapse into this state he began to think of Jeanne. He reflected that at that moment she was probably rising from her bed, and he succeeded in kindling in his mind a fire that was rather sensuous than amorous, and such as had never yet burnt within him either when in Jeanne's presence or when thinking of her ; a fire which an experienced healer of souls would have pronounced a symptom of declining passion. Exasperation, distress and the images Don Giuseppe's voice had evoked, were all reduced to ashes by that flame.

They all left the church together, the Marchesa serene and smiling ; Maironi sullen ; the lively Signora Soldini's expression showing her eagerness to speak words that her eyes were already uttering ; the Commendatore meek and modest. When he had saluted the ladies respectfully he turned to Maironi smiling half benevolently, half mischievously, and with mock timidity as if fearful of going too far, uttered his little jest :

" Now that you are out of work . . . out of work . . . perhaps I shall see something of you ! Remember the humble and the outcasts ! I have something to say to you, but there is no hurry. I am going to Rome to-day. I shall return on Monday—not next week, but the week after ; if you have time you will be sure to find me on Monday between four and half-past."

Then the Marchesa and her son-in-law at once withdrew. Signora Soldini, flushing suddenly with excitement, asked the Commendatore if he had noticed how deathly pale Maironi was. But the Marchesa, on the contrary, how unconcerned she seemed ! She was indeed an enigma, that Marchesa. The intimates of Casa Scremin said it was simply virtue, but, good heavens ! it was a sort of virtue too nearly resembling iciness ! As the Commendatore—who, by the way, had noticed neither the pallor nor the air of unconcern —did not seem any too well pleased by this vehement and unnecessary judging of other people's sentiments, and as his only answers were muttered monosyllables, the lady hastened to change the subject, and said, with a laugh, that her conscience was far from easy because she had really come to church more to see him than to hear the Mass. Her husband wished to consult him, and begged to know when he could be received. The Commendatore answered, perhaps, not over cordially, that he should be delighted—delighted! and planting himself firmly knit his brows in a soliloquy, half mental, half expressed, in a summing up of days, hours, meetings, appointments, events that would certainly take place and probable events, from which summing up he finally deduced the answer, given after some further hesitation, that he would receive Signor Soldini at a quarter to four on the same Monday he had appointed for Maironi's visit, and exactly five-and-twenty minutes after his arrival from Rome. Having given his answer, he made a low bow, and walked away, to the great chagrin of the lady who had not expected this, and was somewhat vexed. The sour man, who had been hovering at a respectful distance, and waiting not without impatient twitchings of his eyebrows and jaws, immediately hastened towards him.

"At your service," said the Commendatore. But at that moment some one issued from a narrow lane, and came groaning up behind them. "Commendatore, pray don't forget me! I am Bisata, Commendatore. I play the bassoon in *mi*. I had great hopes that *Sindaco* Maironi would get me into the band. Now they say the Liberals are going to make him *sindaco* over again. Pray speak just one word for me, Commendatore." The sour man ordered him off very roughly, and the kind-hearted Commendatore, much disturbed at seeing Bisata turn threateningly towards the man who had interrupted him, pressed some coins into his hand, and dismissed him as gently as possible. "There, there! Now go, my good fellow!" But immediately a doleful beggar-woman approached them. "I have been waiting all through Mass for you, bless your heart! Will you give me a pair of old boots?" This produced a second outburst from the sour man. "You are a woman, and you ask him for his old boots?" The excellent Commendatore, once more greatly distressed, produced more coins and some kindly advice. "There, there! Now go, my good woman!" At last the sour man could have the interview which had been promised him in the church as they were leaving the chapel. He also was a beggar. He wanted a licence to sell salt and tobacco[1] for a certain female relation of his who was somewhat short of money. For himself he wanted the Commendatore's support in a dispute he was engaged in with the tax agent. "Get him an order, do! Perhaps then he will be more amiable, miserable cur that he is!" The Commendatore listened to the whole story with admirable patience, asked questions, smilingly checked the sour man's outbursts, found excuses for the Royal Office of Taxation, and at last came to a *quia* in which he was deeply interested. He inquired jestingly what point the municipal crisis had reached. What was going to happen after the mayor's withdrawal? The sour man was amazed at the question! Had not the Commendatore heard the appalling revelations of the most illustrious Signor Bisata! "Ah, tut, tut, tut!" cried the Commendatore like a second Marchese Zaneto. "Tell me seriously now!" Thereupon the sour man scenting danger in the Commendatore's questions, and catching sight of Marchese Scremin himself coming towards them, his face full of ready words, and as if evoked by that "Tut, tut, tut!" exclaimed that the Commendatore was too busy just now, and with an anxious "Your servant, sir! Your servant!" took himself off, although Scremin called out to him peremptorily to remain.

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[1] Salt and tobacco being government monopolies in Italy, the government usually confers the right to sell these commodities upon such as have served the state faithfully as soldiers, coast- or customs-guards, etc., or upon poor widows. The widows of generals and statesmen have often been only too glad to accept a "Rivendita" in some large town. In such cases the business is carried on by an agent, and a handsome income is in many cases the result. The lottery agencies are also disposed of in the same way, lotteries being another government monopoly.—*Translator's Note.*

The Marchese also asked for an interview in order that he might have an opportunity of begging for far greater things, but the Commendatore could not grant the interview then and there, and ended by giving him an appointment for the famous Monday. Zaneto was somewhat put out by this, for he wished to speak with his friend before and not after his journey to Rome. Meanwhile the two had trotted on and reached the Commendatore's palace. An elderly man-servant stood in the door-way chatting with a postman who immediately advanced towards the humble but all-powerful one, and, pulling off his cap, held out a paper to him. "This is the memorandum about my son, Signor Commendatore, and many thanks!" The Commendatore took the paper with a good-natured smile, and saying he must go to the Library at once, trotted off, hoping also to rid himself of the Marchese,to whom he could not promise any balm for his *ulcus senatorium.* Scremin, who was about the Commendatore's size, but much older than he, declared that he also was on his way to the Library, and fell into the same trot, so that they looked much like an ill-assorted span of horses being shown off at a country fair.

"I have so many things to tell you," said the broken down old nag on the left, as he paused, panting on the Library stairs. "However, I must keep it all for Monday! Meanwhile don't forget. . . . " Here, in the unusually short and broken phrases which his trot and the fatiguing stairs had enforced upon him, he named the formidable Minister, to whom he himself could have wished to be recommended.

"About that Dessalle affair also," he added before entering the librarian's room. The Commendatore made a slight gesture of surprise. The Dessalles had inherited from their father a law-suit with one of the small American powers, and had already obtained two favourable sentences, but as yet had been unsuccessful in obtaining financial satisfaction. The matter had become a diplomatic question, and the Council must not be allowed to go to sleep over it. Some time previous, before the meeting at Praglia, Carlino had begged Marchese Scremin to speak to the Commendatore about the affair, and the Commendatore had exerted his influence on behalf of the Dessalles in Rome, with that kindly zeal of his, which he was wont to place at the disposal of all his neighbours, even the most distant, did they but ask for it. When the scandalous reports concerning Jeanne and Maironi had begun to circulate, Marchesa Nene, although she made no one the confidant of her secret anguish, had treated Jeanne's affectionate effusions and pressing attentions to herself with such coldness, that Jeanne had not dared to persevere, and the Commendatore, who, though a silent man himself, was surrounded by tale-bearers who were acquainted with every detail, was well aware of this. Therefore when the Marchese once more commended the affair Dessalle to his especial attention he smiled inwardly, like some wise bystander, looking on at human weakness, for he was also aware that the Dessalles had exerted their influence in ministerial circles in favour of Zaneto. Zaneto guessed his thoughts and skilfully avoided the invisible shaft.

"As a matter of fact," said he, "if I considered the interests of the town I should not ask you to help them, for if the Dessalles should obtain what they demand —it is a matter of millions, you know—it is highly improbable that they would remain here, and their departure would certainly be a loss to the city."

This answer seemed a masterpiece of sophism, and indeed so it was, only the sophism was sincere; it was the masterpiece of an industrious conscience but not of industrious lips. The clever and learned Marchese of the left cerebral lobe had contended so long and so fiercely with the scrupulous Marchese of the right cerebral lobe that he had at last convinced him that by soliciting the Commendatore's support for the Dessalles with the main end in view of separating Jeanne from his son-in-law, he himself was justified in accepting all incidental benefits which might accrue as a natural consequence of this act, such as any help the Dessalles might be able to give in obtaining a place for that modest loaf of dough, Zaneto, on the great ministerial shovel, in anticipation of the next baking!

"Well, well! Good-bye, good-bye!" said the Commendatore, who was struggling inwardly and rigorously with his own sound judgment, which he did not recognize as such, but mistook for a hasty judgment determined by his rapid walk.

He had come to the Library to hasten certain researches in the interests of some who were practical and of others who were poetical; of some who had solicited his aid in proving the validity of their claim to a fortune and of others who had solicited his aid in proving the validity of their claim to a title of nobility.

"Tell me now," exclaimed the Librarian, who was becoming exasperated, "Is it really true that even a wet nurse has been to you for a recommendation?"

"Yes, yes! It is true enough," the Commendatore answered, but added: "However, I am off to Rome to-day," and his voice cleared in the hope that the necessary delay would spare him many interviews.

Then the Librarian begged him not to leave without having spoken with one of the assistant distributers of books, and he rang the bell to summon him. As the assistant entered, timid and respectful, the Librarian rubbed his hands gleefully, murmuring: "Even the wet-nurses! Even the wet-nurses!"

"I beg your pardon, Signor Commendatore," said the distributer, "but I believe you are the president of the Committee of Supervision at the Institute of Technology."

"Yes."

"I have heard that a new professor is expected here."

"Yes."

"Well, you see, I have a room to let, and if only ou would speak a good word for me. . . ."

The Commendatore got out of this as best he could, and the assistant announced to the Librarian that Marchese Scremin wished to speak with him as soon as he was at leisure.

"He wants to speak to me? I hope he is not going to ask for money!" The Commendatore started. Money? Why? Were the Scremins in financial difficulties? Yes, indeed; and it was such a pity just now when their daughter was beginning to recover. Was she indeed beginning to recover? Well, at any rate, that was the latest news, and came straight from the sacristy of the Cathedral. She appeared to be recovering, and would come home in a few days.

The poor Commendatore who, in his great heart, had an especially tender spot for all who had been born within the encircling city walls, in the outlying districts, or even beyond the paved ways, in those suburbs belonging to the commune which the affection of the public benefactors of antiquity had never reached, went his way, saddened by the threatened ruin of this illustrious family of his native town, his conscience pricking him because he felt he was grieving too deeply over the ruin, and not rejoicing sufficiently over the recovery which had been announced to him. Perhaps it was not true; but if it should prove true, then good-bye to the Senate—good-bye to the Senate indeed!

When he had nearly reached home a little man in spectacles came hobbling up to him, a clever and honest doctor of law, whose noble political and administrative emotions, which were, however, purely platonic, kept him in a state of continuous excitement.

"Well, Commendatore, so the Prefect is going?"

"I know nothing of that."

"Why, people are saying it is you who have brought about his transfer!"

"I?"

"Yes, indeed, because the Prefect wishes to push matters and get the Communal Council dissolved, and you are opposed to this."

And the little man laughed boisterously, to give his own speech that gaiety and softness which facilitates the swallowing of other people's speeches when they have a rather bitter and hard kernel.

"Do you know what?" said the Commendatore, somewhat nettled. "I am going to follow the moon's example and go into an eclipse!"

And he disappeared within his own vestibule.

II

Don Giuseppe Flores, absorbed in a double vision, was praying alone in the little church connected with his villa. It often happened that he would pause on one of his hill-side paths, and meditate upon the greatness of God, contemplating, at the same time, the magnificent and holy beauty of creation. Thus his thoughts were now engrossed in contemplation of blessed eternity, stretching lofty and obscure, above the outspread vision of his long life, which was laid bare before him in such a manner as to show the inner side as the only really important part. He did not see the great good that had irradiated from him upon so many souls, in ways hidden to his own consciousness, without deeds, without direct words of council and of teaching, but simply through the atmosphere of his own pure and humble being, so full of God. But he saw in his life much sluggishness, much pettiness, much inactivity and even much love of ease, for he was as rigorous with himself concerning the desires of the flesh as he was lenient with others. He saw traces of dead affections which had been bestowed fruitlessly upon delusive phantoms, and which had vanished with them; traces of other affections bestowed with too much ardour upon things of this world, even upon the house in which he was now praying, the trees on his hills, the flowers in his garden. He saw, like great, shadowy, empty spaces, opportunities for doing good which he had neglected, and he saw how the merit of his good works had been minimized by absence of sacrifice on his part, by his listless obedience to the divine impulse, by the feeling of self-complacency with which he had weakly regarded the good he had done, a sentiment which, if not actually sinful, was certainly not noble. Thus he saw his whole life, and his prayers were not saddened by the view, but rather became more tenderly fervent. The secret reward of his habit of attributing to God all the good that was manifest in him, and to himself all that was not good, was the hidden joy of giving himself up with all his shortcomings to the Infinite Mercy, of feeling God's presence with an ever increasing tenderness of love, the more freely he recognized his own unworthiness. When, in consequence of that natural weakness common to all humanity, the tension of his spirit became relaxed and other thoughts drew him unconsciously towards themselves, they were thoughts of his family, all of whom had gone before him into the great mystery, some in obedience to the manifest laws of nature, others in obedience to the hidden laws of accident. Stern souls, joyous souls, calm souls, ardent souls, all had passed through the world bearing the torch of faith, all had departed up-held by the gentle, supporting arm of Christ, and in the unadorned and modest little church their names were recorded on many tablets.

Don Giuseppe had loved his family with the most ardent affection, and had mourned for them with rare tears full of the holy adoration of the Divine Will. Now his mind wandered to dear figures who had always occupied the same place in the little church. He lost himself in the memory of faces, of garments, of attitudes, of circumspect greetings exchanged in the holy place. Then a consciousness of the silence, of the present emptiness recalled him to the sad reality and to his prayers. And there mingled with them a breath from these beings invisible to the living, a vague sense of remorse that he had not satisfied some innocent desire of theirs, neither entirely concealed nor plainly expressed ; that he had not been ready enough to open the way to some difficult confidence, that he had not been the first to return to the subject, when, the way once opened, it would have been better to speak out. And from this last memory he passed unconsciously, and while his lips continued to pray, to that other memory of his talk with Maironi, about whom he had since heard grievous things without making an effort to help him. The trotting of a span of horses and the noise of wheels sounded on the road in front of the principal door of the chapel, which was closed. Don Giuseppe heard both the trotting hoofs and the wheels turn into the courtyard of the villa. Presently the servant came to announce Marchesa Scremin.

He went out to meet her on the steps leading up from the courtyard. The old lady, clad in decorous black, a little more fleshless, a little more wrinkled and waxen than usual, hastened up the steep stairs in deference to the old priest, who, on his part, was hastening to make the dangerous descent in deference to her. Don Giuseppe did not venture to exhibit either gratitude or pleasure, for it would have been presumptuous to attribute to simple courtesy a visit which he feared must rather be attributed to some unpleasant cause. The Marchesa had spoken to him in the city about a certain inscription which she wished engraved upon a medal, and which she had begged him to compose, desiring him, at the same time, to give the necessary orders to the jeweller. But it was not possible her visit was in connexion with this.

For her part the Marchesa seemed determined to hide the real object of her visit beneath a tangle of disjointed and irrelevant phrases, of compliments upon the old man's hearty appearance, upon his garden, the beauty of the little yellow pond, swollen by recent rains, and upon the geese, its pompous navigators. This led her to speak of some ducks which she herself kept, of *taglierini*[1] boiled in duck-broth, and of Zaneto's tastes; Zaneto did not like goose. Don Giuseppe smiled, not knowing what to say, and responded only by gentle monosyllables to this rambling, nervous discourse, which finally came to an end when the poor, tired old lady found herself seated on the sofa in the hall. Then it was Don Giuseppe's turn to talk, to inquire for the Marchese, and, hesitating, and in a subdued voice, that other person for whom he had celebrated a Mass in the Cathedral a few days before.

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[1] *Taglierini*—A sort of very delicate, home-made macaroni, of which the Italians are extremely fond.—*Translator's Note.*

A look of quiet grief settled upon the poor old lady's pitiful face. "Who can say . . . ?" said she. "Alas . . . !" She did not finish her sentence, and during the long silence that followed two tears appeared in her eyes. Don Giuseppe sighed, greatly distressed, and bowed his head reverently before the secret grandeur of this humble creature, whose words were so disjointed, and who hid her unfathomable grief so carefully, and submitted so meekly to the bitter decrees of the Divine Will.

"So much suffering, Don Giuseppe," she said at last. "Alas, yes . . . so much suffering, and nothing gained by it. But indeed I had almost rather. . . ." She was silent, and tears shone in her eyes once more. Don Giuseppe believed he had grasped her meaning; she had almost rather that her daughter should not recover than that she should see, should know. The Marchesa had evidently taken it for granted that he had understood her, for without having uttered the bitter words, she presently confirmed them with a "Yes, indeed!" full of grief, of severity, even of disgust. That "Yes, indeed!" told the whole story, and Don Giuseppe made a gesture as if he would gladly contradict her, but could not. "How can he possibly inflict such suffering upon such a poor, saintly, unhappy creature!" Lenient as he was towards all human frailty, he abstained from any more severe judgment, but the pleasing face of unholy passion had never seemed to him less attractive, nor its other selfish and cruel face more repulsive.

"Nevertheless," said he, "I saw him in the Cathedral with you that morning. . . ."

More from the Marchesa's expression than from her confused answers, Don Giuseppe gathered that although

Maironi's conduct on that occasion had been irreprehensible, there was no apparent change in his attitude towards Jeanne Dessalle. It was always difficult for the Marchesa to express herself, but when it came to alluding to and describing an unlawful passion, fitting words really failed her, or at least they burnt her lips so that no one had ever heard her utter them.

Ever since her wedding-day she had been religiously devoted to her husband, and in her heart she harboured the most bitter contempt for the sins of passion, for she had never been tempted and, even in the flower of her youth, had never known what fancy was. She was most severe with her own sex, and she judged Jeanne with great harshness, although she never put her judgment into words; a sense of her own dignity and respectability forbade this. In speaking her name or in alluding to her, the old lady's face would assume a dark expression, and her voice would become hoarse with the same gloom, that was all. She was less severe towards men because, according to one of her maxims rather iron than golden, she believed they were at least as much seduced as seducers, and she would not admit that true feminine virtue was ever assailed. However, although she believed Piero had been seduced, it never occurred to her that the long separation from his wife might in any way serve as an excuse for him. Had any one ventured to suggest this to her he would simply have disgusted her, and have forfeited her respect as well.

"I always treat him as if I knew nothing," said she. "And I speak of him to others in the same way; I have made this a rule."

It was a fact that there were some in the city who laughed, some who smiled and others who were moved to sad pity when the Marchesa uttered certain ingenuous praises of her son-in-law.

"I have also thought. . . ." she added with hesitancy, "well . . . I don't know! Yes, many things . . . many little things . . . there might be many little ways. . . . But, indeed I cannot say. . . . You understand, Don Giuseppe?"

"Ah, yes! Yes, indeed!" said Don Giuseppe, who did not understand in the least, but who was seeking to guess her meaning or to help her as it were with a spiritual push.

"Now take this, for example!" the old lady went on, and she proceeded to tell and still not to tell in that inimitable style of hers, of the fine web of intrigue she had woven around her son-in-law, intending to gradually gather all the threads into her own hands, and draw him away from Jeanne Dessalle. But so far her intrigue had been fruitless. Piero had never devoted much attention to the management of his property; this duty had at first been entrusted to Marchese Scremin, who was himself a poor manager, and later to agents. The income from his large fortune was far less than might reasonably have been expected. Before his wife's illness his mother-in-law had urged him continually to visit his estates, watch his agents and examine their accounts. Later she had left him alone. As soon, however, as she was aware of the danger at Villa Diedo she had undertaken a secret and arduous task. Her son-in-law's landed property, situated in the province of Brescia, was managed by an elderly agent who was in the habit of coming to consult Maironi from time to time, as he had formerly consulted his guardian Zaneto. Strictly honest, and entirely devoted to the interests of the house of Maironi, he had not concealed from Piero his opinion that the best means of furthering his interests was, first of all, to take up his residence in the place where the greater part of those interests centred. At the time, this advice had been most unwelcome to the Marchesa, and she had hated the man for offering it. Later, feigning anxiety concerning her son-in-law's affairs, she had charged a trusted friend to inform the agent that anything he might do to persuade Maironi to remove to Brescia would meet with her entire approval. At the same time, being partially acquainted with Zaneto's financial embarrassments, she had suggested to him that a change of residence might be advisable ; that if they were at a distance from their relatives and friends it would be far easier to practise certain economies, and that Elisa, should she return to her family, would certainly prefer to be where she was not so well known. Piero's mayorship had been a great stumbling-block. Hardly had she learned of the crisis, and thanked God in her heart for it, than she was terrified by the thought of the peace-makers who might seek to bring about a reconciliation between the mayor and his colleagues. She thought of the sour man, and without breathing a word to him personally, succeeded in letting him know that she was anxious about Maironi's affairs, that she considered the crisis a most fortunate occurrence for her son-in-law, and that she would be far from grateful to any one seeking to reinstate him at the town-hall. This with the intention of encouraging the man to sprinkle his acid even more freely than usual. She had twice spoken to her son-in-law about the financial embarrassments in which her husband was involved. The first time she had calmly, almost jestingly, given him a hint of her intention : " Sooner or later, my dear boy, we shall all have to go and live at what's-its-name ! " meaning Brescia. The second time she had been more bold and more absurd, and had talked of selling the palace and all their estates, and of going to live in the Maironi house in Brescia : " And if you won't come, we poor old folks must go alone ! "

Telling and still not telling in her own peculiar way of the many fine threads of her well-meant intrigues, she snarled them so hopelessly that at a certain point Don Giuseppe was completely lost, and she herself was so entangled in her own web that her interlocutor despaired of her ever extricating herself. But she continued her recital unabashed, although it now became more rambling and more incomprehensible than ever, getting ever farther afield, bringing out, in her throaty voice, words that clashed together, and holding fast to the one obscure idea that possessed her mind, which she wished and still did not wish to disclose. Don Giuseppe began to grow uneasy. The very hopelessness of the Marchesa's ramblings amidst an ever-increasing gloom, and the lightning-flash of an occasional " We must do so and so," convinced him that her mind held a definite plan, and knowing that she was not in the habit of announcing her innermost thoughts without preamble, the idea struck him that she had assigned a part in this plan to himself, not an easy part, and one, he feared, not proportioned to his real capacity. Finally the Marchesa reached this conclusion, which was none the less startling because it was expected : " Don Giuseppe, is my meaning quite clear to you ? "

" Ah ! " he exclaimed respectfully, and then lapsed into silence. As the silence was becoming prolonged he added, greatly embarrassed : " Well, perhaps not quite ! "

The Marchesa smiled sadly and beseechingly: "You must speak, Don Giuseppe."

To whom must he speak? After passing his hand across his forehead several times as if to clear his brain and free it from a troublesome pre-occupation, Don Giuseppe ventured to inquire.

"Well," the Marchesa replied, "to Zaneto first."

Don Giuseppe hesitated slightly and made a wry face, while the Marchesa rambled on once more, but this time somewhat less incoherently.

"You see, I really don't know what to do. He has got the Senate into his head. He is quite set upon it I assure you. Even if they should make him a senator—which I don't believe they ever will—what good would come of it? Nothing but expense."

Here the Marchesa confided to him as best she could, something that was particularly bitter to her. Zaneto even went to "that house" in order to obtain the Dessalles' support! "He says that is the best way to show the world there is nothing wrong, but I say he has no business to go there." And then she returned to the question of expense once more. She told of her husband's difficulties. She declared they all arose from his excessive kind-heartedness, "for he must needs give largely in charity, and keep tenants who did not pay their rent, and do this, that, and the other with his money." Goodness knows what would have happened if she had not always done her best to check his generosity! And now she was coming to the worse phase of the matter.

A worthy person, whom she would not name, "a thorough rascal, I assure you!" had insinuated to Zaneto that they would not make him a "what-you-may-call-it!" in other words, a senator, on account of the unpleasant rumours concerning his financial position, and that in order to make sure of his nomination he must give "I don't know how much to I don't know whom," to the incurables, or the orphans, or the waifs and strays, or the scurvy hospital, "to anything he himself may be in want of money for, I believe! Just fancy that!"

Don Giuseppe did indeed deplore these misfortunes, but he knew of no remedy to recommend, and he did not see by what right he could present himself before the Marchese and proceed to lecture him.

"But it is your place to do this, Marchesa," said he. "How could I possibly hope to move him if you yourself are not successful?"

The Marchesa shook her head, sighed and confessed her own incapacity. "I cannot indeed, Don Giuseppe. He is the best of men, but we do not understand each other."

As a matter of fact, if the old lady's eloquence was halting and heavy, her husband's, on the contrary, was eminently subtle and easy. In all questions she perceived only the unswerving reasons of simple justice, while he perceived the tortuous reasons of a justice ready to make concessions as occasion might demand. Her arguments were derived from a narrow circle of notions and ideas, his from the broader field of his superior culture and rhetoric.

To her the senatorial chair meant only vanity and expense. By a curious coincidence, in her practical scepticism, her most philosophical argument against her husband's ambitions closely resembled the argument with which Jeanne, in her theoretical scepticism, had almost derided her friend's nascent socialistic leanings: neither Zaneto's presence at Palazzo Madama[1] nor, for the matter of that, the chatterings of all the other senators either, would influence the very least of the world's affairs in the very slightest degree. In vain the worthy Zaneto, not daring to retort that he was more than willing to respect the pre-established arrangement of the world's affairs, strove to point out to her the difference between guilty ambition and legitimate ambition, a sentiment it is our duty to cultivate. In vain he talked of the services he might render to religion, services which would cost him nothing but his vote. In speaking thus he really believed in his own sincerity, and succeeded in proving it to his incredulous wife, who was continually harping upon ambition and vanity. He explained to her that he was made of the same clay as other men; that he was conscious of not being entirely free from certain aspirations which were, perhaps, not of a very noble nature; but that, as he perceived in his conscience a quantity of good reasons rising above these aspirations and almost concealing them, he was under no obligation to examine himself more deeply, for man must be charitable even towards himself, and must abstain from such investigations of himself as he would consider it uncharitable to practise upon others. His wife, dazed and exasperated, waved aside all this psychology and casuistry, which was to her simply an incomprehensible logogriph.

She had therefore given up attempting to convert Zaneto herself, as she once more assured Don Giuseppe, who sighed and kept moving his shoulders and head wearily, as if lifting a great weight.

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[1] Palazzo Madama—The palace in Rome where the Senate meets.—*Translator's Note.*

"What am I to do?" said he.

Regardless of his words and gestures the dauntless old lady, seeming to take it for granted that he would be her ambassador, proceeded to unfold a fresh mission, with which he was to be entrusted, and of which the poor man had had not the slightest suspicion. She rambled on for some time concerning her own possessions not included in her dowry, and which she had reserved and guarded jealously, in an almost miserly fashion indeed, for love of her daughter, that they might not, as she told Don Giuseppe, "be swallowed up in the great caldron," the great Scremin caldron, which was badly cracked by many debts. Hers was a handsome fortune, and up to the present moment the worthy Marchesa had never been willing to contribute either money or her signature towards mending the cracks in the great caldron.

"But if it is necessary, Don Giuseppe," said she, I will let it go."

This then was Marchesa Nene's secret thought, the thought she had kept back as long as possible, the true and only reason of her visit, and it had at last reached her lips by the strangest and most roundabout ways, had fallen from them almost as an idea that had but then germinated in her brain.

She had conceived the thought long before, and had allowed it to ripen slowly, with the intention of producing it when the right moment should have arrived. This was her idea: she would propose to Zaneto to pour her fortune into the famous caldron—the contents of which should henceforth be stirred only by a reliable man of business—on condition that all the estates and the palaces of the Scremins be sold, and that the family remove to Brescia. Meanwhile she had made secret inquiries concerning the real state of her husband's affairs, concerning the market value of his possessions and of her own. Having heard that the Office of Public Works was seeking for more convenient quarters, she had cautiously questioned one of the pawns at the Prefecture, in order to ascertain how matters really stood, that she might eventually offer the Scremin palace. She had even carried her jewels to Venice to have them appraised. She had prevailed upon the physician who had brought the precious words from Elisa', to give her a sort of official warning in writing, to the effect that, should Elisa leave the asylum cured, it would be wise to remove her to entirely new surroundings. Upon discovering that the director of a certain charitable institution, with whom Zaneto was intimate, was endeavouring to extort a large donation from him, she became alarmed, and, convinced that the proper time was come, spoke to Zaneto. Zaneto was touched, he wept with gratitude, embraced his wife, calling her "his dear old woman," and then confessed to her in a pathetic tone his great affection, not so much for the house and lands of his ancestors, as for his native town. If God should grant them the great blessing of this recovery, a temporary absence would suffice, a journey, a short sojourn in some other place. At any rate that could be arranged later. Why bring about such an upheaval, such a cataclysm indeed, in anticipation of events which, unfortunately, were still most uncertain? The Marchesa had then tried to paint the danger at Villa Diedo, but had done this so awkwardly and unskilfully that the worthy Zaneto had had no difficulty in sweeping her arguments aside with an outburst of optimistic rhetoric, after which he inquired very humbly why she had made her conditions so hard. Here, however, he met with firm resistance. The "dear old woman" answered resolutely that she wanted him to "settle down," and that the only way for him to "settle down" was the way she had proposed. Then the frowning Zaneto entrenched himself behind his dignity. He could not imagine what she meant by "settling down." He was, thank God, not aware of having failed in any of his domestic duties. Should a domestic duty render it necessary for him to transfer his residence elsewhere he should have the strength to fulfil that duty without the support of pre-established stipulations and conditions. Did Madam not understand that her conditions were offensive? But this Madam refused to understand, and became more inflexible than ever, so inflexible indeed that Zaneto in his turn, refused to continue the discussion.

The Marchesa now proceeded to explain to Don Giuseppe both her plan and the message he must deliver to Zaneto; and ever faithful to her habit of reticence, she refrained from informing him of her own direct attempt and defeat. She feared that, knowing this, Don Giuseppe might refuse to act as her ambassador, or that his action might lack that confidence which is always a power in itself. Don Giuseppe gazed at the old lady in astonishment and admiration! He had always believed her to be particularly fond of worldly goods, to be deeply attached to her possessions, and had thought she would rather die than give up her house, her church, and her old friends and change her habits. She who, out of affection for her daughter, and an innate love of order, had constituted herself the jealous guardian of her own interests, now sat there before him in her utter confusion of mind, as far from believing that she had spoken words worthy of the deepest admiration,as that she had spoken Greek. Don Giuseppe did not know how he should accomplish the mission with which he was entrusted, but he felt, before God, that he must not refuse to try. He consented, and once more began to smooth his brow with the five outspread fingers of his right hand, pressing them hard and then slowly drawing them together in a bunch only to spread them out and draw them together again, like one much perplexed by some abstruse calculation. While he was thus laboriously thinking the matter out, the Marchesa unexpectedly announced that she had another favour to ask of him. The old priest raised his head, his face wearing an ingenuous expression of astonishment, which said plainly enough : Another ? Do you not think that one which already oppresses me is sufficient ? The Marchesa did not appear to notice him, and all unabashed, proceeded to tell him of the great esteem in which Piero held the Commendatore, with whom he had had many dealings while he was mayor. If the Commendatore could be persuaded to do so, he might exert a very good influence over Piero. Some one must beg him to try, beg him to arrange to see more of Piero, to attach him as much as possible to himself. It was a well-known fact that the Commendatore had the deepest reverence for Don Giuseppe ; who could, therefore, perform this mission better than he ? This was not a difficult undertaking, and Don Giuseppe demurred only at the "deepest reverence." Indeed he said not a word, but simply made a gesture of compassion for the sadly mistaken idea of him that this good man had conceived. Meanwhile the usual rural man-servant had appeared with the usual cups of coffee, and the cautious old lady, assuming her habitual, placid expression, immediately brought the conversation back to the geese on the little lake. She must go and have a closer view of those geese before leaving. As she rose with Don Giuseppe intending to walk about the garden, the Marchesa requested the countrymen to "tell Giacomo," and was quite satisfied that she had thus imparted to Giacomo the explicit order to harness the horses. "Giacomo?" the rustic said to himself. "That must be the coachman. But what am I to tell him? Well, he must guess that for himself!" And he departed with the laudable intention of repeating the message word for word. But Giacomo was not the coachman who had driven Marchesa Nene to Villa Flores; Giacomo was the name of a long since defunct coachman of the house of Scremin, the emblematic name which the Marchesa calmly bestowed nine times out of ten, and whether they liked it or not, upon the Beppis, the Tonis, and the Titas who had preceded the Checco of the present moment in her service.

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A grouping of clear notes around the calm movement of a slow melody, neither gay nor sad, would alone have the power to express that intangible, inward something which escapes the poet when he seeks to describe the slow progress of Don Giuseppe and the Marchesa among the grasses swaying in the wind beneath the flickering shadows of the silvery clouds, among the bushes, the whispering of whose leaves was interrupted by the sad, persistent notes and the soaring runs of nightingales. The couple exchanged hardly a word, and therefore only music could describe this silence so full of meaning, this not unconscious communing of their souls, a communing expressive of mutual pity; the Marchesa reflecting how the old priest, cherishing a gentle, poetic hope, had prepared these beautiful surroundings for his dear ones, now, alas, all descended to the grave; Don Giuseppe reflecting upon the kindness of this sorrowing, weary woman, who, to please him, was exhibiting such an interest in his garden; the hearts of both were soothed, meanwhile, by that most lasting of earth's pleasures, a calm appreciation of the beautiful, which their afflicted souls had not yet outgrown. For in the Marchesa's complex brain there was a cell for the sense of beauty in flowers, trees and gardens. Many exceeding fine nerves of thought led to this cell, and one that was large and paralysed, the nerve of language.

"Here are the geese," said she with her usual gentle calm, as they approached that yellowish, microbe-breeding, restless pond, that gloried boldly in the title of lake.

"Here are the geese. They are all ducks." Then Don Giuseppe explained to her patiently that the geese were not ducks, and that his palmipeds represented two different tribes.

At that moment a feeble ray of sun illumined the pastoral scene, the restless waters, the group of tremulous poplars rising beside them, and the green and oval expanse of pasture, flanked on one side by the sloping wooded hill, on the other by a high wall of verdure, both meeting at last against a dark background of fir trees. That large, paralysed nerve of the Marchesa's contracted slightly. "Beautiful," said she. "That what's-its-name, that pasture is beautiful, Don Giuseppe!"

Don Giuseppe did not answer. He was lost in contemplation. That spot in the garden was his favourite.

Once he had dreamed of the games and merry laughter of children playing in that pasture, children of his own blood, two generations of nephews and nieces. Now, as he watched delightedly, with his never-failing freshness of spirit, the capricious love-making of light and green, his thoughts reverted to his will which he had made some months before, after much hesitation and meditation. The villa and farm would become the residence and property of six elderly parish-priests of the diocese, and of six elderly district-physicians of the province, all equally feeble and impecunious, and he pictured to himself these miserable heirs of his loitering in the field.

The Marchesa added that should Elisa ever leave the asylum, such an abode as this would be perfect for her. Don Giuseppe immediately took fire, and offered her the villa and garden so warmly that the Marchesa, smiling amidst her tears, seized his wrist and held it a long time, pressing it in silence, and giving him thus to understand that she was deeply grateful, and at the same time that they must not be too sanguine. Don Giuseppe, moved by her emotion, did not know what to say in his confusion. She was strong, so strong that many believed her to be unfeeling, but now that she had opened her heart to Don Giuseppe as she had never done to any one before, her strength, which rested mainly upon her silence, had failed her. She saw some benches among the poplar trees.

"If you will allow me," said she hoarsely. "It is lovely here."

And she sat down. Don Giuseppe seated himself beside her, and his bewilderment and anxiety, his fears of worse, must have been so apparent that presently the Marchesa said to him with an effort: "It is nothing, Don Giuseppe, nothing!"

Little by little the innocent peace of the green and of the lonely waters, and the gentle murmurings of the trees, soothed the sorrowing woman, as in a house which has been visited by affliction bitter tears are sometimes gradually hushed by the unconscious gaiety of little children.

"There," said she, drying her eyes with her handkerchief. "I was thinking."

She meant that she had been affected by the thought of Elisa in that garden. Don Giuseppe did not understand, nor did he seek to do so. He entreated her, somewhat irrelevantly indeed, to be careful of her own health. "I am so strong!" she answered, and added, with unwonted energy, that she did not wish to die, indeed she did not.

Oh, poor sorrowful soul! How happy she would have been to rest in death, for she believed firmly in God. But what if her darling should come forth? Who would protect her, who would defend her against that woman? What could Zaneto do? Only her mother could care for her, and her mother must and would live!

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Later, when the Marchesa asked Don Giuseppe's farmer if he had "told Giacomo," he simply stammered some incomprehensible words, and when his master urged him to explain himself, answered in an undertone, and with a look of amazement, addressing Don Giuseppe instead of the Marchesa: "*Signor*, he says he is dead!" In fact, when the saucy coachman had heard the call: "Oh, Giacomo!" he had called back: "He is dead!" The Marchesa understood and shook her head, smiling with kindly tolerance at her coachman's ready wit.

Before entering the carriage she begged Don Giuseppe to remember her daughter in his prayers.

"You may believe me, Don Giuseppe, Piero never understood her."

Only she herself had understood her, only she knew the treasures of that soul.

When he was alone the old priest recalled what a friend of his, a poet, had one day said to him in speaking of Marchesa Nene. He had compared her to a little packet of gems such as jewellers keep, a little cluster of tiny precious stones enveloped in a leaf torn at random from an old copy-book, and covered with crooked, childish scrawlings, devoid of sense. He had also compared her to certain admirably planned subterranean caverns, arranged for some hidden and beneficent purpose beneath the disorder of an ancient and half-abandoned civilization.

But as soon as he no longer heard the noise of the wheels that were carrying away that revered psychological problem, he forgot these poetic similitudes, and thoughtfully re-entered his house bending beneath the weight of his difficult mission.

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Ten minutes after his return from Rome the most excellent Commendatore seated himself, fresh and calm, before an enormous heap of letters and papers, and summoning the parlour-maid, requested her to bring him a cup of strong coffee. At the same moment the man-cook came in to announce Signor Soldini.

"Bring two cups then," said the Commendatore to the girl.

Returning presently with the coffee, and opening the door behind Signor Soldini, she saw that his wife was with him, so she silently withdrew to the kitchen once more to consult her colleague the cook. Should she go back to her master with three cups of coffee ? " For those smug-faced hypocrites ? " replied the cook, who was a Radical. " No, no ! Let them go without."

Soldini had indeed brought his wife, and was full of apologies for this unexpected complication of the interview. As there existed some difference of opinion between his wife and himself concerning the matter to be discussed, and as the lady was convinced the Commendatore had it in his power to remove every reason for disagreement, and as both had the most perfect confidence in the rectitude of his moral and religious conscience, the husband had said to his wife : " You had better accompany me. We will consult him together." While Soldini was explaining this to the Commendatore in his choice and clear language, calling him, half seriously half jestingly, his political opponent, the lady, blushing and smiling and evidently much embarrassed, was herself apologizing for her supposed boldness, exclaiming : " What must you think of me ? What must you think ? " and the Commendatore, while he hastened to assure her that he was " quite delighted, quite delighted ! " was eagerly and with some misgivings reviewing in his mind all the different subjects, the simple and the complex, the peaceful and the insecure, which might possibly be coming under discussion.

Well, to begin with, it was not really a question of politics. Hereupon the Commendatore, whose experience of both men and things was vast, although he did not doubt the sincerity of his interlocutors, immediately concluded that politics would play an important part in the coming conversation. The fact was Soldini's political friends thought they had reason to believe that their adversaries were working to bring about the dissolution of the Town Council, and preparing Maironi's nomination as Liberal candidate, making use of the deputy-councillor Bassanelli, who had for some days been at the head of affairs at the Prefecture. He had been a companion in arms of Maironi's father in 1859. Should the Liberals succeed, the clerical newspaper, in compliance with the wishes of certain leaders of the party, would declare war to the knife against Maironi.

"You must not do that!" the lady exclaimed.

"That is the point," her husband replied, smiling. And he went on to prove that in such a case as this war to the knife would be justified.

Then he explained to the Commendatore that while the other ladies of the party were furious with Maironi, and would like to see him tore in quarters, his wife thought only of the salvation of his soul, and trembled lest he rush headlong into error and evil. She feared, moreover, that a part of the responsibility would rest upon Soldini's own shoulders, perhaps the greater part, because Soldini would never stoop to violent invective, but, with his cold and measured urbanity, was capable of inflicting far deeper wounds. "My wife," said he laughing, "does me the honour to believe this." But he added that he thought she was mistaken. "Desertion to the enemy is always a morally guilty action, and an act of public immorality should be publicly and most severely censured in the manner which time and place prescribe. This you will certainly grant. Pray have patience with me! Whenever the Liberals are in conflict with us, they are very fond of quoting largely from the Gospels. I don't mean you—you have never done this; but as to the others I fancy they know about as much of the Gospels as I do of astronomy; they are acquainted with four or five well-known episodes, the rating of the Pharisees, the pardoning of the woman taken in adultery, and, best of all, the famous words: *regnum meum non est de hoc mundo.* Now there are passages in the Gospels in which Christ used invectives, and this without the slightest weak hesitancy, and precisely against such culprits as aroused his indignation by the cowardly nature of their crimes; but . . . pray understand me well, for I do not wish to be accused of having lacked Christian charity in my handling of Maironi! . . . this was not so in the case of Judas. The Pharisees had much good in them, they might still be saved, and so Christ hurled his invectives against them. But he did not do so with Judas; there was no help for him, for Satan had entered into Judas."

"There, there, there!" the Commendatore exclaimed, showing plainly enough that he had little relish for this subtle reasoning. "There would be much to say in confutation of many of the remarks you have made; much to say, for instance, concerning the cowardliness of certain desertions, and concerning your comparison between the invectives of the Gospels and the invectives of modern journalism." Here the Commendatore began to chuckle inwardly. "If you," he continued, "feel inclined to act the part of Christ, you are perfectly free to do so, but will you kindly explain what I have to do with Satan?" And he laughed boisterously.

"Has he never knocked at your door?" said

Signora Soldini, laughing also. "Has he never begged for your support in obtaining the order of St. Maurice and St. Lazarus? Or did he perhaps want a position in the Department of Public Instruction?—Now I may speak, may I not? You see certain of my husband's friends—most worthy souls, but very ignorant of the ways of the world—have mismanaged this Maironi affair from the very beginning. And they have mismanaged it because they would not listen to my husband."

Soldini interrupted her. "What can one expect, when my own wife does not always listen to me?"

"Let us speak with that frankness which our grey hairs sanction. The first outcry about this unfortunate infatuation of his was made by the Liberals, as was perfectly natural, he being a Clerical. I am convinced that the outcry was far greater than the evil, and that all the rest of the trouble might have been avoided had prudence and charity been used towards a man who was sorely tempted—we must admit that—towards a young man in his painful position. But instead of that his friends imprudently began to deny everything, and this almost solemnly, and then a reaction of still more imprudent ferocity set in among them, and you have just heard what their present intentions are. They may have a right to act thus, but this is the way to lose souls and not the way to win them back again. You are surely saying to yourself: Why does this woman grow so warm? I feel keenly about this because formerly Maironi sometimes came to our house, and I took it into my head that that young man would one day amount to something, although I saw well enough that he was rather *excessive*, rather what is now termed impulsive. Ah, Commendatore," she concluded, "you alone can reconcile us!"

"I?"

This the Commendatore had really not expected.

"Most assuredly," said Soldini, and he began to explain the riddle. It was well known the dissolution of the Town Council was on the programme at the Prefecture. There were those indeed who declared that Bassanelli had attempted to hasten the advent of the royal decree. Now in case the royal decree should arrive the Commendatore must persuade Maironi to decline the candidacy. "My wife reasons thus," Cavaliere Soldini concluded. "If Maironi does not accept the Liberal candidacy the Clerical paper will keep quiet. The Commendatore must in some way find a means of preventing this candidacy, either bringing pressure to bear upon Maironi himself, or upon the Liberal party."

"Tut, tut, tut! You are treating me like a Venetian gondolier!" said the Commendatore, laughing as he buried his hands in his pockets, and brought out with a certain emphasis, the jesting words: "*Scia premi! scia premi!* Press forward man, press forward! But I should much prefer to *stalir*, to stay where I am!" And he gave one of his little laughs. Then, becoming serious, he added that he had never taken any part in elections, and that he did not intend to begin now.

"You must be patient a little longer," the Cavaliere answered. "That is the way my wife reasons. I must frankly admit that I myself hold other views. Allow me to explain. I do not believe that Maironi would listen to you, nor do I believe that he would accept a Liberal candidacy. There is something I have never mentioned even to my wife, but which I will now tell you. I have a suspicion that Maironi is about to enter that strange category of rich Socialists which exists in Italy. Pray do not mistake my meaning. He will go among the honest men, not among those who become Socialists to escape ruin ; that is what I mean. Maironi is, precisely, an impulsive, but perfectly honest fellow. I have been led to form this opinion by various little incidents, various trivial incidents, which have come to my knowledge, and judging also from something he must have said to Bassanelli, who is not on very cordial terms with him, for certain reasons of a delicate nature . . ."

"I know nothing about that, nothing at all!" the Commendatore hastened to say, and his tone implied that he did not desire to be enlightened. "But I do!" the other replied. "If the elections should take place and Maironi should allow the Socialists to nominate him candidate, just fancy what an amount of polite abuse I should be obliged to heap upon him! Now you see, Commendatore, how I look upon the matter, and how you can not only prevent the disagreement between my wife and myself of which I have already spoken, but perhaps save a soul as well, and most certainly ensure our domestic peace."

Cavaliere Soldini laughed as he pronounced these words, and the Commendatore laughed also and answered, "No, no, no! I do not see, I do not see, indeed I do not!" in a tone implying that he saw only too well.

"I made a great mistake just now," said Soldini. "The dissolution of the Town Council is not on the programme at the Prefecture. It is in plain sight on a programme much nearer at hand."

"Oh, what leaps!" cried the Commendatore, still laughing. "Oh, what leaps! A few moments ago you made me a Venetian gondolier, and now you make me Minister of the Interior! Oh, what leaps!" And neither Cavaliere Soldini with all his skill, nor Signora Soldini with all her honest enthusiasm could get anything more out of the Commendatore, who continued to repeat his exclamation: "Oh, what leaps! Oh, what leaps!" Notwithstanding his lively manner he had been most carefully on his guard from the very beginning, for he had a suspicion that his visitors were acting a pre-arranged comedy in order to further the purpose of the Clerical party, and prevent the dissolution of the Town Council. This suspicion was unjust as far, at least, as the lady was concerned, but it did not prevent his conducting his visitors to the head of the stairs with the greatest ceremony.

Maironi was already waiting in the ante-room, and Rosina, in consideration of the fact that her ferocious colleague in the kitchen had no personal objection to him, had made her arrangements to carry the two cups of coffee to that poor, patient Job, her master, as soon as the Soldinis should have taken their departure. Upon hearing them go downstairs she herself started downwards from the third floor. Hardly had she reached the second landing when she met a friend and relative of the family, who stretched out eager hands towards the tray, while his face shone with pleasure.

"Good girl!" said he. "That is just what I need after my hearty dinner!"

Rosina defended the coffee bravely, but her opponent attacked her ever more vigorously.

"No, no! It is for Signor Maironi!" she cried.

"You can heat another cup!"

"But there is no more ready!"

"You can make it fresh then!" And the friend tossed off his cup of hot coffee with many grunts and sighs of satisfaction, leaving Rosina to return, grumbling, to the kitchen.

Maironi, while mayor of the town, had several times called upon the Commendatore, either to consult him concerning the administration, or to ask for his support in certain matters of public interest. He had always been received most cordially. This time, however, he had come unwillingly, suspecting that the Commendatore wished to talk to him about politics. He was well aware that the Liberals hoped to profit by his defection from his old friends, and it would have been painful to him to be forced to withstand an attack led by this good man whom he respected, and whom he would not feel at liberty to answer as severely as another. He shrank from yielding, not only on account of the attraction which the socialistic idea had for him, but still more because the Liberal group appeared to lack energy, and their programme seemed but ill-calculated to generate that strenuous activity of which he felt an ever-increasing need, in the consuming unrest of his soul, tormented by a sense of the deepest dissatisfaction with itself, and by the impotence of love to give it peace.

The Commendatore, ignoring the gentle clamour of his nerves for the coffee that was denied them even after so much faithful service, received the new-comer with manifest pleasure. He went to meet him in the ante-room, and before offering him a seat beside him, showed him some books he had recently received, among them a treatise on trigonometry.

"Look at this! Look at this!" he cried. "You were not aware I am a geometrician!" There was also *Le Socialism Intégral.* "You are acquainted with that work? Dreams, all sentimental dreams!"

Maironi had indeed read the book. Already in his previous state of mind he had been curious concerning Socialism, and had read a French synopsis of *Capitale* by Marx, *Progress and Poverty* by George, and Benoit Malon's book.

"They may be dreams," he said warmly, "but you must admit that there have been dreams which have revealed the future."

"Pray be seated! Pray be seated!" said the Commendatore, hastily withdrawing the hand he had stretched out to test the heat of that blood, which he found was boiling.

He immediately introduced the subjects which he had wished to discuss with Piero when he had requested him to call upon him. In the first place certain historical studies he was pursuing called for copies of some documents in the archives of the city of Brescia. He had thought of appealing to Maironi's kindness to procure them for him. He supposed Maironi often went to Brescia; did he not own some large estates in that province? He laid stress upon the "large estates," and then touched upon the disadvantages of city life, upon the happy lot of those who live upon their own lands, managing them themselves, with plenty of leisure for study and perhaps even for a few dreams. And here he purposely laughed one of his discreet laughs. These words which were carefully planned to convey a deeper meaning, which said much and still said nothing, helped him to pass on to the more delicate subject, which he now most cautiously introduced.

The delicate subject had reference to Zaneto's senatorial ambitions. The Commendatore began by speaking of Brescia, he touched upon the political conditions of the town and province, and upon the importance which the Minister very properly attributed to the election of a deputy, which would soon take place there. Like a cautious hawk he circled broadly and slowly downwards, hardly touching, as he brushed lightly past it, a certain message which a member of Parliament had brought, in regard to the conditions it was supposed had been made concerning Zaneto's nomination ; which conditions had been whispered in the honourable gentleman's ear by one of the Ministers, and foremost among which was Maironi's support of the ministerial candidate in a certain borough in the province of Brescia. The prudent Commendatore's circumlocutions annoyed Maironi, who knew full well that his only reason for using this involved language was his fear of mentioning Jeanne, of even alluding to Jeanne, to whom the Hon. Berardini had communicated the news. This prudence, which was almost an offence both to Jeanne and to himself, exasperated him, and without waiting to hear more, he declared warmly that the thing was impossible, that he must decline to bind himself either to support or oppose any one. " Have patience with me ! " said the Commendatore, who was more anxious to deliver the whole of his well-pondered discourse to his own satisfaction, than to persuade Piero to decide one way or the other. And he did deliver his speech, going into lengthy and minute particulars, and not without several repetitions for the sake of clearness. Thus Piero was given to understand that as to the final result, some were perhaps over sanguine, that not even the Minister in question was in a position to promise success, but that it could not be denied there was a probability, a probability—the Commendatore laid stress upon the word—and the election at Brescia would doubtless weigh very heavy in the balance.

"There!" said he at last, smiling and satisfied, and glad to have relieved himself of this tangle of arguments, and of all fear of ill-timed silence. "And I hope I do not deserve the epigram of a very dear friend of mine, who was a great wag, a great wag: *longus esse laborat, obscurus fit!*"

Maironi now renewed his protests still more vigorously, but this time they were received calmly, with exclamations of: "Do just as you please! Just as you please! I cannot advise you!" The Commendatore was indeed so calm that Maironi felt he was unpleasantly indifferent, and was seized with a desire to startle the man by some bold words.

"It is not on account of the Brescia affair," said he, "but because I hold entirely different opinions."

"Well, well, well!" said the Commendatore, while his face said: "Bad, bad, bad!" like that Venetian priest who was in the habit of saying: "Well, well!" to each fresh sin his penitent confessed.

"Listen," said he presently, and very solemnly, as if speaking with conviction after brief meditation. "Don't bind yourself too soon in consequence of these opinions of which you speak. *Vita doctrix!* Be more assiduous in your attendance at life's school, and go as a pupil who keeps his seat upon the bench, listening and watching. Then perhaps later . . . perhaps later . . ."

The Commendatore held his right hand aloft and shook it as if imparting a benediction to the ceiling, this signifying that perhaps later he might assume the teacher's chair.

Rosina's nose appeared at the door. "*Signor*, the Prefect is waiting."

Maironi rose, promised to procure the documents the Commendatore desired, and withdrew, glad to have been able to express his opinions thus openly to one of such keen insight. In the ante-room he met the limping Bassanelli, the deputy councillor, who, since the transfer of the Prefect had managed the affairs of the Prefecture. The two men bowed coldly.

"Shall I carry the coffee to that lame man?" thought Rosina, who had repaired the damage done by the free consumer. But her master rang the bell and gave orders to admit no one else, and Rosina did not venture to do more than listen a few moments at the door. She heard Bassanelli say in a loud voice, "My dear Commendatore, we are limping badly!" at which her master laughed, but she could hear nothing more, and so took herself off, grumbling because the government would appoint Prefects like this one, who had no self-respect or dignity.

Cavaliere Bassanelli's face, hair and left leg—the Palestro leg—had undergone many changes since that night in 1859 when he had sat drinking merrily with the Seven Wise Men at Isola Bella, whither one of their number, Franco Maironi, had come to embrace his wife before enlisting and going to the front. In spirit he was still as good-natured, rough and eccentric as in those days, but his superior culture, the office he filled, and intercourse with refined and gentle people, had greatly modified his language, without, however, robbing it entirely of its picturesque boldness. Sceptical to the heart's core, thoroughly imbued with a sense of what is positive and practical, hating Radicals more fiercely than most, and priests more fiercely than any, making love to women while he despised them, this Paduan concealed his real sentiments in so far as the dignity of his office demanded, and no farther. He held the Commendatore in the highest esteem, but personally he had little liking for him, considering him too religious, too fond of priests, too adverse to frank judgments, over cautious in speech, and unwilling to call things by their right names. He was none too well pleased to have him at the Prefecture, although he was well aware of his gentleness, and found it far more difficult and dangerous to steer his course among the deputies than to come to terms with this man, to whom the government always confided the Prefecture when delicate matters were to be handled. In the present instance the delicate matter was the dissolution of the Town Council, for which the Liberals were clamouring and which was indeed justified by the composition of the Council itself, in which the Clerical majority, prevailing only by a few votes, appeared quite incapable of finding a mayor. Bassanelli's desire to upset the Clericals was restrained only by the fear of a coalition of the constitutional and extreme parties at the next general elections. He was therefore most anxious that, in the event of communal elections, the management of the campaign should be in skilful hands. And here the matter had been crippled by the initiative taken by certain individuals, ambitious but devoid of authority, and who drove Bassanelli nearly mad. "If I may not set their heads straight it would at least be a comfort to twist their necks for them!" said he. "Listen, Commendatore!" and the fierce Paduan spirit was alive within him. "Yesterday an imbecile belonging to the Moderate party said to me: 'if we must choose between petroleum and candles, we had better take candles!'[1] Well I am not only anti-Clerical, but neither do I, unfortunately, possess your faith. This beastly world appears so boundless that I can't understand how there can possibly be another. I don't feel the slightest need of priests to help me live an honest life, but, by G—— ! rather than see certain Liberals at the Town Hall I should almost prefer to keep this miserable collection of snuffy, half-idiotic pew-openers!"

While this erratic speech was in course of delivery, the poor Commendatore's brow had become heavily clouded. "Now let us come to a decision," said he gravely, and without looking at Bassanelli. And he went on to advise him to make no fresh proposals to government, but to await coming events. He informed him that the deputy of the borough was working hard at Rome to bring about the dissolution, and that it was quite possible that a more or less explicit order to propose this might arrive unexpectedly from the capital. When he rose to take leave of the Commendatore, Bassanelli apologized for having scandalized him by his atheism, and alluded to Franco Maironi, the ex-mayor's father, who, he said, used to scold him for this and for "certain other slight matters," but who had, nevertheless, been very fond of him. "And when he scolded," Bassanelli added, "he seemed half-fiend and half-saint."

"Bravo! That reminds me! What can you tell me about the ex-mayor?" said the Commendatore, scrutinizing the other's face, and not without a certain curiosity concerning the secret to which Soldini had alluded. Bassanelli grew as red as a lobster, and burst out with: "Don't speak of him! Don't speak of him! He is a mad man! He is not worthy . . ."

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[1] Petroleum means the revolutionary parties; Candles, the Clerical party.—*Translator's Note.*

"Tut, tut, tut! There, there!" cried the Commendatore, interrupting him.

"He is not worthy of his father, I tell you! I have already said something of the sort to him, and if I get the chance I shall repeat it to him again still more emphatically! I hope he won't turn back, at least!"

"What do you mean? Return to the Clericals?" And the kind Commendatore laughed, hoping a little hilarity might cool this rage somewhat.

"Return to the Clericals? Nonsense! He is going straight to the Socialists! I tell you he is a mad man! A few days ago he talked to me exactly like a lunatic about these very communal elections, and trotted out the most incomprehensible theories. Try to stir the white of an egg into your soup with a spoon—it is precisely the same thing! The Clerical was simply the chrysalis of the anarchist—take my word for it! And he will injure us! He will use his name, his money, and a certain genius of which he is undeniably possessed, to injure us."

The Commendatore seized this favourable moment. "Let us send him away!" said he.

"My dear sir, I would send him to the Antarctic Pole by the five o'clock express, if I could! But how is it to be done?"

It was rumoured in the city that in spite of his fifty-four years, his cynicism, his repeated declarations that he cared for no women save the "little, white, soft geese" among them, Bassanelli was in love with Jeanne Dessalle, whom he had known as a girl, and now frequently visited at Villa Diedo. Neither Bassanelli nor the Commendatore were aware of this rumour.

"What if . . . if . . . if . . ." the latter gentleman began, but ran ashore at the third "if." "I was thinking of a plan . . ." he added. "What if you, who frequent Villa Diedo, should try to persuade that blessed woman : . . Good Heavens ! . . . things have indeed gone far enough !" These two exclamations, containing both censure and charity, expressed his opinion of the "blessed woman's" conduct, and he added that perhaps Bassanelli might be able to convince her of the propriety of Maironi's leaving the town when the electioneering campaign should begin, and of his not accepting either candidacy.

"I ?" cried Bassanelli. "I will tell her so in your name if you like !"

"For pity's sake !" the Commendatore exclaimed, quite terrified. "No, no ! What are you thinking of ? For pity's sake !"

"My dear Commendatore," Bassanelli began. "Woman is the handle of man ! You would know this if you did not dwell among the Orders of Angels, the Principalities and the Dominations ; [1] and indeed, I don't know what harm it could do you to confess to this knowledge. This handle may be a mistress, just as it may be a wife or a cook ! My cook, for instance, has been thirty years in my house, and does exactly as she likes with me ! Consequently her sweethearts are my masters. If she were a man-cook I should probably be very fond of him, but he would not be my master. It is the femininity of that little grinning bundle that subjugates me !"

Rosina's nose once more. "*Signor*, Don Giuseppe Flores."

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[1] A reference to the Orders of Angels and the Celestial Hierarchies as described by Dante.—*Translator's Note.*

"Then that is settled," said Bassanelli. "I am to speak in your name."

"No, no, no! Pray be prudent!" the Commendatore called after him as he retreated through the ante-rooms, his voice, answering "Yes, yes, yes!" growing ever fainter. At the same moment Don Giuseppe entered the study. The Commendatore hastened forward to meet him, his face expressing the greatest astonishment and respect. Standing behind Don Giuseppe, Rosina was asking her master by means of gestures, if she should now produce the two cups of coffee. The Commendatore took no notice of her gestures, and, concluding that Don Giuseppe, whose visits were very rare, must have something of a secret nature to impart, he renewed his order not to admit any one else. Seated side by side and happy in the refreshing consciousness of the identity of their moral and religious opinions, of a mutual devotion, devoid of familiarity but nevertheless, very profound, these two godly men conversed at length in low tones; these two men, so unlike each other, and so well fitted by nature and by special virtues, each to the different mission which the Father had called him to fulfil. Don Giuseppe was the first to speak, pouring out his heart, little by little, and smiling brightly upon the Commendatore, who listened with an anxious expression, for he was thinking of many things connected with the subject in hand—things of which the priest was ignorant—and of what he had just heard from Soldini and Bassanelli; his meditations left him little hope of success for the plans which Marchesa Nene cherished. In his turn he related these things. He also mentioned the advice he had given Bassanelli, and that gentleman's strange views, which were still worrying him. After all, this appeal to Signora

Dessalle's influence was, in a way, taking advantage of and officially recognizing a state of things which should not be recognized under any circumstances. What did Don Giuseppe think? Don Giuseppe was rather dubious, and his somewhat rambling answer did not clearly express his meaning, for it did indeed seem to him most inopportune to make use of that influence, but, at the same time, he did not wish to worry his revered friend over much.

"And you yourself, Don Giuseppe?" said the Commendatore. "You who know Maironi, who knew his parents also, I believe, why do not you make an attempt?"

Don Giuseppe sighed and passed his hand across his eyes. "Dear me!" he answered. "I don't know how to do anything; I don't know how to act, how to speak; I am so helpless!"

The Commendatore protested against this self-disparagement, and was convinced that Don Giuseppe would make an effort. But he kept this opinion to himself.

"Well, then," said he at last, "if we cannot do anything we must hope for the best. You will see that the Lord Himself will soon take the matter in hand."

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When the way was clear at last Rosina came in with the coffee.

"There has been a regular procession, *Signor!*"

"Has there?" said her mild master.

"I should say so," Rosina replied, "and the last one was the saint."

She added that a short time before Marchese Scremin had arrived at the same moment as that individual who had been there once before about the contract for emptying of the cesspools at the barracks in Verona. She had sent them both away.

The faithful maid stood watching her master with maternal satisfaction as he slowly imbibed the well-earned comfort of the spiritual beverage. Presently she proposed opening the windows, there was such a smell in the room! Of what? The Commendatore did not smell anything. Indeed there was a very unpleasant odour "of many breaths and of the Prefect's hair-dye." Her master would not believe Bassanelli dyed his hair, and Rosina laughed boldly at his simplicity. And Signor Maironi? Had he told the Commendatore his wife was much better, but that, on account of that horrid woman. . . ." "Hush, hush! Enough, enough!" said her master. Rosina was astonished. What harm was there in saying that? "You are far too saintly!" And how about that other poor, lame man, with his cook who stole his very shirts for her elderly lover?

"Have done, I tell you! Take the coffee away."

The Commendatore gave the tray a push intending to push Rosina out at the door in the same way. But Rosina stood her ground. Was it not better to know about things? It was indeed well to know, but not to tell. And how could he expect to know things if no one told them?

"My good girl, there are many ways of gaining knowledge. Listen to me now."

Here the Commendatore showed her a little book bound in black leather. "There is more knowledge on one page of this little book than in all the heads of all the Commendatores and of all their maids put together. And if you could read Latin I should recommend you to study the *de evitatione curisae*. . . ."

"That is all very well, Signore," Rosina promptly retorted, "but I am not in the least inquisitive!"

"There, there! Now go!"

As Rosina was slowly approaching the door, grumbling, "Indeed, I am not in the least inquisitive!" her master called her back.

"Rosina, who told you Signora Maironi is so much better?"

It was the handmaiden's turn to triumph now! "You see! You see! Who is inquisitive now, I should like to know?"

And without deigning to answer his question, the saucy creature trotted away with the coffee-tray.

CHAPTER V

NUMINA, NON NOMINA

I

"MY dear," said Carlino Dessalle, "how about the flowers? It is almost five o'clock, you know."

Jeanne was writing in the Ariosto room opposite the fresco in which the lovely and frail Angelica, her naked limbs bound to the rocks, is depicted as trembling between the she-monster Orca, the glutton of the sea, who is rising out of the water, and that other monster, the hippogriff, the glutton of the sky, who is descending with Ruggero upon his back.

"We dine at seven, do we not?" she inquired without raising her head.

"Yes, but don't forget you have to dress."

Jeanne neither moved nor answered.

"Listen, Jeanne," said her brother with some vexation. "I have not forced these guests upon you. I asked you if you would be glad to receive them and you said you would, so——"

"Yes, yes, indeed! Of course I am delighted! I will go at once," Jeanne answered nervously. She started up suddenly, folded the sheet of paper upon which she had been writing, and hurriedly placed it in an envelope, quivering with impatience the while. Carlino stood watching her; her eyes were red.

"Oh, good heavens!" said he somewhat impatiently, and in an undertone. "A nice state of mind this, for a dinner party!"

"Nonsense! What do you mean? I am quite happy, delighted, even gay! I will go and see to the gathering of those flowers at once. What sort of flowers do you wish?"

Protesting thus warmly she placed her hands on his shoulders and gazed intently into his eyes, anxious to see his brow clear and to hear a kind word from him, for she already regretted having given him a glimpse of her inward sufferings, and was filled with misgivings.

"Hush!" Carlino cried. "This cannot go on. I have always told you you believe what is not true. You are making yourself miserable for a man who cares not at all for you. Perhaps he did have certain intentions in the beginning, but he has found out he will not succeed with you!"

Jeanne blushed to the roots of her hair, and placed her hand before his mouth.

"No, Carlino, you must not say such things!"

"Well then, what has he written you? What are you crying about? You are certainly crying because of the letter you received to-day. Don't deny it!"

"In the first place I am not crying, and anyway, how should I know why?"

Carlino laughed. "That is splendid!"

Jeanne laughed also, and immediately took advantage of his good humour. "See how gay I am! Now tell me what flowers you want, there's a good boy!"

He shook his head, resigned but not convinced, and answered carelessly, after a long pause :

" Roses. Only roses. Roses in great profusion ! "

" In great profusion ? But where am I to find them ? They are all out of blossom."

" Nonsense ! Those on the terrace are out of blossom, but those trained against the wall below the *Foresteria* are loaded with most lovely roses. Come now, tell me why you were crying ? "

" I was crying with joy ! Yes, yes, yes ! I am quite happy ! "

She gave him a hearty and sounding kiss, and withdrawing her face a little, looked smilingly at him and murmured ; " When are you going to Milan ? "

" To-morrow, I expect."

" If I go with you will you take me to the *Quartetto* the day after to-morrow ? "

" What will be going on at the *Quartetto* the day after to-morrow ? "

Jeanne mentioned a famous foreign artist.

" Good ! I did not know that. I shall be delighted to take you. But you know my business will detain me at least three or four days."

" I will come away on the third, Saturday."

" Alone ? "

" I fancy so."

" So be it then. But what is the meaning of this caprice ? "

" Thank you," cried Jeanne as she ran away. Her brother called her back. " Excuse me," he said, " but is this a rendezvous ? "

" Partly, yes."

" You might have said so."

" I am not sure yet."

"Look here. You shall not run after him."

"I am not running after him."

Carlino did not seem convinced and insisted: "Remember that you must safeguard your dignity in the eyes of the world."

Jeanne was on the point of answering: "What do I care?" but checked herself, and said: "You need have no fears."

"That will do then."

She passed swiftly from the room, quivering in the hope of this meeting which she had not anticipated.

Maironi had been gone a week, and had left in obedience to her wishes. Bassanelli had not refrained from communicating the Commendatore's opinion to her, that it would be advisable to send the young man away in case the town council should be dissolved while the elections were taking place. He had added that the royal decree of dissolution was on its way, and that it would be wise to act before its arrival, because, very probably, the Royal Commissary,[1]—in consideration of the pressing nature of certain questions relating to the city government—would order the elections to take place almost immediately, and so the campaign would begin at once. Jeanne was not deceived as to the true motives of this zeal, but she was very glad that the Commendatore should take such an interest in Piero. She had long wished to secure such patronage as his for her friend, a guide of such great authority, who might recall him from the road along which she saw he had begun to travel, towards a party obnoxious to her, not only on account of its creed, but also because of the uncleanness of its members. She also hoped to obtain favour in the Commendatore's eyes, that they might one day conspire together. She was well aware how little hope there was of succeeding in this with a man so stern and pious. But, after all, conscious that she was deserving of the respect of all men, she would not allow herself to despair, and had meanwhile promised Bassanelli to do her best towards the fulfilment of the Commendatore's wishes, and had begged him not to hide from that gentleman her willingness to comply with them.

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[1] Royal Commissary=The functionary appointed by government to govern a city when its Town Council has been dissolved.—*Translator's Note.*

She had found it the more easy to consent to this sacrifice because she saw full well how dissatisfied Piero was with himself, with the life of inaction he was leading, and because she also saw he was tormented by a strange unrest, which he told her he himself was unable to account for. She now loved him immeasurably more than when she had cast the imaginary poison to the winds from that lofty loggia at Praglia, thus silently protesting her resolve to live for him alone. She loved him far more than when, upon the night of the eclipse, she had offered him her lips, and prudently pressed the button of the electric bell at the same time. It seemed to her that her love could not be greater, and that, nevertheless, it was always increasing. She thought only of him, felt him only, and if, at first, she had been tormented beyond expression by the suspicion that he loved her only in words, as a phantom, an impersonal idea of love, or as a sealed vase of delight, it now seemed to her at times that she should be satisfied simply to love, to love always, even though her love be not reciprocated. When she was feeling well, although she was always delicate, the anticipation of his visits, his presence, and the parting from him, caused her suffering; but on the other hand, when she was not well there was no greater restorative for her than seeing him. She would sometimes dream that they were married and dwelling in another country, another house, amongst different people; that he spoke to her of grave questions, in a low voice, gently but with authority; that their apartments were divided, and that she did not venture even to caress him, but that, nevertheless, she was gloriously happy only to belong to him thus. She loved immensely but still not blindly. She believed she understood Piero, knew the defects and excesses of his nature better than any one else; better, above all, than he himself. She believed she could read in his heart the secret of that strange unrest, which he told her—perhaps not with perfect sincerity—he himself could not understand. She was still convinced that he loved her, but she was sure his love was no longer in just proportion to the protestations which his lips still continued to utter, and the consciousness of this lack of sincerity could not but torment her. She was convinced that his many years of religious training, of ardent Catholic faith, of pious practices, had moulded his soul into a form which, although modified by reason where conscience was concerned, remained unchanged in the sub-conscious depths; and she attributed this strange unrest to a vague sense of remorse, springing from the depths, which were still religious. Although sure of the bitter truth of this, still she did not wish to communicate to her friend a scepticism which she saw was repugnant to him; she was glad to hear him pour out passionate words in defence of his remaining religious convictions, of God and of the immortal soul; she simply wished and hoped that those vapours of remorse might finally vanish in the innocence of their tie.

She had therefore encouraged him to devote himself seriously to the management of his own affairs, and had seconded the persistent appeals of the Brescia agent, who, spurred by Marchesa Nene, was continually worrying him. She had reminded him of his accustomed journey to Valsolda in May. He was already behind-hand this year! A slight difference of opinion existed between them upon this point. Piero did not seem inclined to go to Valsolda. Why? He did not say, did not know. He simply did not wish to, that was all. Jeanne suspected that she herself was unconsciously the cause of this. If, in the heat of passion, Piero had spoken to her of the lake as he had done out upon the hills on the night of the eclipse, perhaps now the vapours of remorse warned him to avoid the home of his father and mother, where these vapours could only become more dense and acrid. She overwhelmed him with questions, with entreaties, striving to wring from him some expression of the unjust sentiment he harboured, that she might fight it openly. She was unsuccessful. She even reached the point of beseeching him with words of tenderness and respect for those whose memory he held most sacred. He thanked her affectionately, but quickly changed the subject.

At first he would not even hear of going to Brescia. He was meditating a journey in France and Belgium for the purpose of studying certain societies for co-operative production: the houses founded by Leclaire and Godin, the *Vooruit* of Gand; and he was not disinclined to remain there some time and even don the workman's blouse if necessary. Not considering himself sufficiently prepared for this journey he finally yielded, and started for Brescia. He had written three times since his departure, and his last letter was indeed the cause of Jeanne's tearful eyes.

For the gathering of this great harvest of flowers she descended to that straight path that runs between a long line of *thuje* and the hedge of roses trained against that side of the *Foresteria* that overlooks the Valley of Silence. While she was waiting for the baskets to be filled she rambled onward towards the grove of great ilex trees which was inviting her from the other end of the path, and glowing warmly in the golden shade of the *thuje*, in the reflection from the walls which, high up above, were glistening in the light of the setting sun. Upon reaching the cool, dark grove sloping down into the Valley of Silence, where the grass and the low bushes seemed to be murmuring: "Alone?" she drew Piero's letter from her bosom, and began to read the last page over again, while her hands trembled violently, and then suddenly, as if anxious to escape something bitter at the close, she turned back to the superscription—Oria. She let her eyes rest a long time upon the name, and then glanced downwards at the opening words:

"You see where I am. Forgive me for not writing to tell you I was coming here. It came about in a quite inexplicable manner. The night before last in Brescia, I started suddenly from my sleep with this idea, with the words you spoke when urging me to go to Valsolda throbbing in my memory—perhaps I had heard them again in some quickly forgotten dream—and under the almost terrifying impression that I was being controlled by some supernatural influence. I strove to rid myself of this impression, and determined to go to Monzambano the next morning. But there was no help for it, I was forced to take the train for Lecco.

"I travelled as far as Lecco in a state of torpor, which changed to intense agitation as soon as I was aboard the boat. I asked myself if I be not on the road to insanity! At Menaggio I became much calmer. But when the Lake of Como had sunk out of sight, and the train had entered the lofty valley between the shady hills, as I watched the passing of small fields and pastures, of clustering groves, tiny houses surrounded by trees, narrow lanes, distant roofs, of so many familiar objects each in its accustomed place, I felt such tenderness, such emotion, such a desire to weep as it is impossible to describe; and at the same time, God alone knows why, an intense loathing of men, an intense weariness of life."

She replaced the letter in her bosom, thinking of the words that followed, as she stood motionless there in the path, her restless hand toying with the cool leaves of a laurel bush; nor did she move until she heard that anarchist of a gardener call out to his daughter Partenope, and inquire if there were still many roses to gather where she was. *Pape* answered that there were only thorns left. "The thorns are for the like of us," her father replied.

"And are there none for me, then?" Jeanne thought, with an inward, bitter smile.

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While the gardener, under Jeanne's directions, was arranging the roses in the hall of the Eneid, filling the great vase opposite the enthroned Dido, festooning them about the Herma of Virgil in the corner between the two windows, one looking towards the west, the other towards the south, placing them in vases and bowls of opaque crystal or of oxidized silver, scattering them upon the tablecloth, itself of a greyish tinge, for Carlino had banished all glaring white from the board, she confessed to herself that she would not be willing to exchange her thorns for poor Pape's. No, her suffering was warm and precious. It was like the fire of a painless fever which benumbs the senses and strives with the spirit, producing the most vain and intense imaginings. If any one thorn did really prick her, it was the thought that she would have no other moment of solitude until late that night, unless, indeed, it be a stolen one. That dear old Carlino could not live without society, without having people to lunch, to dinner and in the evening! He had now taken it into his head to invite a large party of Florentine acquaintances who had come to visit the Lake of Garda. They had arrived that morning from Venice. Carlino had escorted them about the town, had then accompanied them back to the hotel, and was now expecting them to dinner. Invitations had been freely distributed among the members of the indigenous society, requesting their presence at half-past nine o'clock, to hear some music and a lecture by Carlino himself on the mysterious theme: *Numina, non nomina,* which was to be illustrated by means of a magic lantern. Carlino's original intention had been to deliver this lecture at the rooms of the local literary club, but he had relinquished the idea of giving it at that place partly on account of the personal character of the discourse, partly because the hall at the club had struck him as being damp enough to mildew the very gas itself, and partly because he had once been there with Jeanne who had worn a cloak trimmed with chinchilla, upon catching sight of which, a pretty dark girl in the audience had whispered audibly to a pretty fair girl: "Meow! Meow! Pussy-cat, pussy-cat!"

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"How are you going to seat these people?" he said to Jeanne. "I warn you I won't have that horrid old witch of a Bertha beside me!"

Jeanne reproached him for his ingratitude towards Signorina Bertha Rothenbaum, her former governess, who was now a translator of Italian novels and correspondent for several German newspapers, and who had always been most kind to Carlino. "I could not put her beside you, any way," said Jeanne.

The two married women of the party, whom the Dessalles called familiarly "Laura" and "Bice," must sit on either side of Carlino. "Don't put Destemps beside Bice," said he, "for if you do it will simply be good-bye Bice, and I shall get a twist in my neck and in my heart as well listening to Laura, who will surely hold forth to me all through dinner about *bouchées de pain*, or the *crêche*, or the refuge for scorbutics, or the consumptives' hospital, or some other equally charitable and loathsome matter. I shall consider myself fortunate if she does not get upon the subject of universal suffrage or a reform of the Senate, or give me a minute description of some distinguished Esquimaux or Kaffir gentleman who has lately dined with her."

It was an easy matter to avoid placing Destemps next to Bice. The party of visitors was composed of the two married gentlewomen, the former governess, whom the Dessalles always called by her Christian name, a young girl, and four gentlemen of the *bourgeoisie*, who were always addressed by their surnames. Besides that turbulent *mouche du coche* of a Laura, who capered lightly upon the wheels, the pole, the very reins of the Car of State, and sometimes even round about those imperturbable automata of the Church; besides the giddy and good-natured Bice, rendered startlingly frank and bold by her official maturity as mother-in-law and grandmother, a maturity which her lips proclaimed readily enough, although her heart denied it, and trusted in her lasting beauty; besides the dangerous Destemps, with fair hair such as the old masters painted, with mystical and sarcastic blue eyes, there was the Florentine professor, Gonnelli, the Yorick of all gay companies, to whom was accorded great liberty of speech, and his young daughter, a *Gonnellina*[1] of seventeen, tongue-tied indeed, but with lively, searching eyes, and an ardent thirst for life's experiences, which thirst, at present in its first stage, burnt in her brain in the form of enthusiasm for such books as reflect life, and for their authors. There was Signorina Bertha, short, lean, and destitute of eyebrows, with a little crimson nose, a pair of small grey eyes, and an intelligent smile that spoke of much kindliness. There was the tall, stout, bearded and bespectacled Bessanesi, the landscapist, who was always intent upon discovering the hidden refinement in the vulgar aspect of things, or, in other words, that beauty, which certainly and indeed fortunately is apparent only to the elect; Bessanesi, who was interested in every branch of art and science, a clever talker, inclined, perhaps, to lapse into twaddle, but most correct in his tastes. And finally there was Professor Dane, the famous Professor Dane of the Dublin University, whose dress was half fashionable, half clerical, who was always carefully wrapped up and enveloped by the delicate hands of fair ladies in the cottonwool of perpetual admiration. His bearing towards all women was exquisite, but it was indeed worthy of Petrarch towards five or six of the more intellectual between thirty and forty years of age. He was a distinguished historian and thoroughly well versed in music and art. Dane was, so to speak, the sacred and venerable banner of the party. At Fiesole, during his convalescence after a liver attack, he had confessed to Donna Laura his ardent wish to pay a short visit to the Lake of Garda, and his disinclination to go there alone. "Alone?" Donna Laura had cried, "Never!" And so this whirlwind of a woman, who would by no means have enjoyed a somewhat too lengthy journey *à deux* with the precious invalid, had fired letters and notes in all directions, inviting half the universe to join the Professor's following. Donna Bice and Bertha had accepted out of respect for Dane; Destemps because Donna Bice had done so; Bessanesi's acceptance was prompted by his æsthetic curiosity concerning the company. Gonnelli had accepted for his Eleonora's sake, and also because he anticipated much amusement at the expense of the idol and his fair and giddy worshippers. The *Gonnellina* had grown feverish at the bare idea of travelling with Destemps, although that fair-haired genius despised the immature palpitations of a *Backfisch* of seventeen.

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[1] *Gonnellina*=A play upon the name Gonnelli, which means "short skirts," so Gonnellina may be translated "Miss Petticoat."—*Translator's Note.*

II

The Dessalles, the two matrons, Signorina Bertha and the Professor having started the conversation in English at the beginning of dinner, Gonnelli, a Yorick who was unacquainted with that tongue, apostrophized Tiepolo's magnificent Æneas in an undertone, and to the following effect: "*Eheu, Troiae fili, nonne tibi quoque. . .*" thus expressing his contempt for English in a Latin all his own, which the ladies could not understand, and which the gentlemen dared not translate. Upon seeing Destemps and Bessanesi laugh and Carlino Dessalle wrinkle his nose in disapproval, Donna Laura and Donna Bice understood that the Latin was untranslatable, but the simple Bertha, whose curiosity was aroused, turned for aid to the omniscient Dane. He had comprehended not a word of this disjointed nonsense, and now appealed to Gonnelli, with his faint smile and awkward Italian: "Was that Trojan Latin, Signor?"

"Yes, yes! Trojan Latin," said Gonnelli. "Very Trojan! And I swear by that beanpole of a Dido—I beg your pardon, Carlino, but you did not paint her—that if you don't drop your English, Destemps, Bessanesi and I will talk Trojan Latin throughout dinner, while my daughter will hold her tongue in the same language!"

They all laughed, even the Professor, and a very lively conversation was continued in Italian. The two gentlewomen who, at aristocratic gatherings, wore with conscious dignity the ideal uniform prescribed, as it were, by place and rank, were only too glad to lay it aside here among these intellectuals, whose society indeed they greatly preferred. There was little congeniality between these women and Jeanne, but they made no secret of their great liking for her brother, a liking shared, moreover, by all women, perhaps because, with a man like Carlino, exquisite in his bearing, a fine musician, well versed in all branches of art, whose views were paradoxical, whose words breathed intense life, but whose nature was, after all, cold and passionless, there could be no danger of going beyond a pleasant titillation of the intellect. As to Laura, who had been a widow for some years, she despised all gallantry. Her friends said that she allowed Dane to play Petrarch to her in a mild way, simply that she might not forget she was a woman; that she might not some day don a minister's hat or a cardinal's skull cap by mistake; and indeed it would have been impossible to find a more harmless *memento*. Bice, who gloried in having inspired Destemps with an ardent passion, but who was far more virtuous than might sometimes be supposed, kept him bound, but at a respectful distance.

They fell to discussing the little city where Bessanesi professed to perceive—Goodness only knows why!—a faint odour of the sea, so that he was always imagining the melancholy Adriatic lay beyond the crumbling summit of every wall that rose against the sky. Destemps was in love with everything he had seen, even with an old, squinting sacristan, dirty, lame, hunchbacked and devotedly attached to his own church, who, upon Gonnelli's exclaiming: "A foul smelling hole, this church of yours!" had answered calmly enough: "Ah, no, Signor! It is I who smell!"

Gonnelli, who had never before crossed the Po, was tolerant and patronizing. "Pretty, this! Not bad, that! Still it is not Tuscan. It looks rather Tuscan, but, after all, it is not."

"Nevertheless," said Carlino, "on the façade of that fine Gothic church you saw the tombs of the Florentines who took up their abode in this very town in thirteen hundred."

"Yes, but they were forced to do so, and what awful Florentine oaths they must have sworn! You may see for yourself that the arch-priest felt in duty bound to put them outside!"

Bice protested that, although she was a Florentine, she adored the smaller cities, and that she would be delighted to dwell in this special town six months in the year. Then Dane made a most graceful little speech, choosing his words slowly and completing them by the movements of his uplifted hand, as white and beautiful as a woman's. He pronounced the town quite charming. It possessed, he said, the little old genial soul of a venerable Italian priest; cunning, witty, versed in the classics, fond of a quiet, easy life, of a life, however, not devoid of certain episodes of a mildly tender nature, somewhat sceptical, slightly greasy about the collar and rather shiny about the elbows. This strange idea had been suggested to Dane by "all those narrow, treacherous lanes, that are always pretending to go to the right and then suddenly come out on the left, or to go to the left, and then come out on the right; by all this old Latin, part of which savours of the seminary and part of antiquity; by all those old sixteenth and even eighteenth century palaces, by all those contrasts, which seem intentionally mischievous, the contrasts between this minute and essentially pretty architecture, and the neighbouring, stupid-looking houses; and finally, by all these silent spots where, here and there blades of grass spring up, grass of such a soft green that we feel we also are quietly vegetating with it, and we think of nothing, while our hearts grow tender and spring-like."

That was what the dead city was like, but how about the living city? How about society? Bice was also anxious to hear. "If I came here to live I should be posted!" And she laughed her little short laugh, that was still juvenile, and that always made Destemps quiver and turn pale. Carlino answered that the living city was a world far larger, more varied and curious than that small world "in which we live" in big towns, except perhaps, in Rome or Paris. "It is the delicious, provincial world you will see at my lecture this evening; it will quite fill the house," he added.

"Don't give the lecture," said Jeanne. "It won't do at all, I assure you. Let the magic lantern suffice. There will be no end to the trouble you will stir up! I happen to know they have begun to gossip already. People will be shocked!"

Bice clapped her hands. "Give it! Do give it!" she cried. The *Gonnellina*'s eyes sparkled, and a low "Yes, yes!" escaped her, at which the others laughed. Her father, however, protested. "That rascally Carlino is corrupting my daughter!" he cried, while Carlino swore solemnly that his lecture would be a perfect *Filotea*[1] of amiability and propriety.

"With those illustrations?" cried Jeanne. This produced an outburst of merry curiosity. Even the outspoken Bice demanded an explanation. The *Gonnellina* said never a word, but blushed hotly, while

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[1] *Filotea*=A prayer-book much used in Italy.—*Translator's Note.*

Laura, the icy Laura, maintained an indifferent and scornful silence, and Carlino protested violently against his sister, who hastened to explain that she had never dreamed of being so entirely misunderstood, that the slides simply represented some well-known residents of the town, and would, of course, be perfectly harmless without the lecturer's comments, but most dangerous if commented upon, no matter how amiably. Hardly had this topic been exhausted when Donna Laura inquired:

"And how about socialism? Is there much of it here?"

Carlino replied that he knew very little about it, because he had nothing to do with politics. He only knew that the city government was in the hands of the clericals, and that his own gardener was in the hands of the anarchists.

"Yes," said the lady, "but the city government will not remain in their hands very long now."

She spoke with conviction, in the tone of one who knows everything, the future as well as the past. She did indeed know far more than Carlino about the political conditions of the little town, and seeing that he was astonished at her knowledge, she determined to bewilder him completely.

"And how is that protégé of yours—that rather ambitious Marchese with the mad daughter? And his son-in-law, the ex-mayor, the ex-clerical? Has he gone to Brescia? Then he is certainly working for us there."

Upon being informed by Jeanne that the son-in-law had indeed gone to Brescia, but on private business, and without the slightest intention of meddling with the election of the new deputy, the lady burst out:

"That won't do! He must work! We are all working for that borough! It is a perfect mania with us!"

Jeanne looked vexed and Bice laughed. "Of course!" said Gonnelli. "A victory at Brescia! It would be no small matter, by Jove!"

"A plaster Victory!"[1] Bessanesi observed.

Donna Laura lost her patience. "Oh, you, Bessanesi, would give up even the bronze one for the sake of a *calembour!*"

"Perhaps, Countess; but I would give it up to you. The government should have only the plaster one!"

Donna Laura grew so warm that, to soothe her, Carlino promised to send a note to the Marchese at once, begging him to come up to Villa Diedo on urgent business. Donna Laura would then have an opportunity of speaking with him, and of binding him, by skilful and flattering insinuations, to hurl his son-in-law upon the field of battle. Donna Laura, feigning ignorance of the attachment between Jeanne and Maironi, a vague account of which had reached her through the Ministry of the Interior, inquired if this Signor Maironi was a man of parts, if he took an interest in sociology. Destemps, on the other hand, asked about the mad woman. Donna Bice and he thought they had once met the Maironis at the baths of Bormio. Was he not a tall, dark-complexioned young fellow, with a tangle of rebellious hair and grey eyes that had a singular expression of intellectual eagerness? She was slim, and of medium height, so Destemps said, with eyes the colour of the Rhône, and a sphinx-like face, the face of a sphinx who refuses to propound her riddle. The others, including Donna Bice, declared she was most insipid; Destemps, however, would not admit that. It was true she spoke very little, and what she said was lacking in individuality, but Destemps compared her dull words to the cryptogamous growth upon stagnant water, which conceals its true colour and depth. He believed she possessed a deep nature, a nature certainly unrevealed even to her husband. Donna Bice ridiculed this psychology; but then, it was the regular habit of Donna Bice and Destemps to contradict each other thus. "Yes," said he, "a singular creature, deep and unrevealed. In fact she became insane, so that proves I am right in my judgment. And I am willing to wager no one knows why she became insane." No, the Dessalles did not know. Carlino had heard that it was hereditary insanity, but Jeanne had heard this report contradicted. Bessanesi asked her if there was any hope of a recovery. "Alas, no!" said she, with becoming gravity of face and tone. She immediately became conscious of her hypocrisy, her heart trembled and she quickly added: "There is no hope."

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[1] A wonderfully beautiful bronze Victory, a work of early Roman art, was discovered at Brescia, and may now be seen in the local museum of that city.—*Translator's Note.*

Then Dane told of a Russian lady, a friend of his, who recovered after twenty years spent in an asylum, and who left it at a most unfortunate moment, for her relatives, who had at first wept for her as for one dead, had not only become resigned, but were enjoying her property, and had arranged their lives as if she had ceased to exist. With exquisite and skilful touches Dane described the moment of the poor woman's return to her home, where she saw the traces of changes which had been hastily and silently concealed, traces of the music-room which had taken the place of her former bedroom, indications and signs of other changes more painful still and that sought to escape her observation. Jeanne seemed to take the same quiet interest in this recital as did the others. She did indeed follow it with that mingling of horror and pleasure with which we picture to ourselves some awful thing that will never happen. But a glance from Carlino, one single, unintentional glance, sufficed to trouble her, like an electric flash lighting up the shadows of the heart. From the vase before her she took a rose and offered it to Dane.

"For the artist," said she, smiling, and rose from the table.

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They all went out to the terrace on the east to smoke. As they were crossing the Iphigenia room Bice said to Destemps: "I warn you that this Signor Maironi and our hostess . . . at least, I believe so! You had better tell Laura."

As soon as she could free herself from Professor Dane, who, more like a gallant than a theologian, had offered her his arm upon leaving the dining-room, Jeanne went up to her own apartments to write to the Marchese. Jealous as she was of these short and precious moments of solitude, what Destemps had said about Signora Maironi, and that other tale of the mad woman who had recovered, had passed almost completely from her memory, and lingered there only like faint shadows upon the background of a picture, which, though visible, do not hold the eye. The thought of the letter, the thought of a meeting had once more taken violent hold upon her, and, as she gave herself up to introspection, she lost the sense of time and of external things. The sudden pealing of the great bells at the Sanctuary did not rouse her, but rather entered into her heart, and set the memory of the letter to vibrating. She sighed, drew the letter forth, and once more began to study it.

"Of course, no one was expecting me. The house was closed and I was obliged to send to Albogasio. There were no candles, there was not even water, and it took a long time to make me a cup of coffee and prepare a room for me for the night. When, at last, towards ten o'clock I found myself alone with the care-taker, in the silent house, the emotion I had experienced on the journey had entirely passed away; this was due, in part, to all the annoyance I had been subjected to, in part to great weariness. I was indeed much surprised and almost pained to find myself so cold. I went out to the terrace which was built by my father, at least so an old woman called Leu, who lives in the town, tells me, and where my Uncle Ribera, 'the poor *Scior Ingegner*,' as he is still called here, and who died before I was born, used to spend long hours, sometimes holding my little sister upon his knee, my poor little sister who was drowned when she was four years old. I recalled certain affectionate expressions Leu had used concerning them: 'He was so good, that he was, and she was so pretty!' As I thought of these words, alone, in that empty house, on that terrace where the dead passion-flower vine that once shaded my father, my mother, my uncle and my little sister, still clings to the bars of an iron pavilion, something I cannot express began to stir within me, and at last I wept bitter tears over my neglected and silent house, over my dead kindred, and over myself, who am not worthy of those lofty souls. ‘He was so good, that he was, and she was so pretty!’ Poor innocent little sister of mine! It was a very dark night. I could not even distinguish the lake, lying black and motionless below the terrace, nor the mountains, whose monstrous brows were enveloped in clouds, which alone shone with a faint light. When I had relieved my feelings by allowing my tears to flow, I experienced an intense and painful longing that my dead might give me some sign of their presence, and I waited, breathless and listening, and all the while conscious of my own folly. First I thought I heard the water kiss the bank; then it was the voice of a night-bird in the woods on the opposite shore; then I heard nothing, nothing, nothing more! I was about to turn away, sighing, from the spot, when, for a moment, I caught a faint sound of great and distant bells. . . .”

Jeanne read no farther. She rose, pale and almost fierce, wrote a hurried note to Marchese Scremin, and went downstairs just in time to hear Carlino defending his theory on love and law against Dane and Donna Bice. She felt that at that moment Maironi would have been grieved to hear her take Carlino’s part, and still—knowing, as she did, that she would immediately regret it—she yielded to a spirit of rebellion, and declared in a loud voice that certain sentiments were indeed most beautiful, virtuous and poetical, and that truth was cruel, hard and cold, but that it was Carlino who had said so. Donna Bice laughed one of her little silvery laughs, and glanced at Dessalle.

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III

Villa Diedo, that fine pile with its many openings and its diadem of statues, light streaming from all its windows, rose white, above the two terraces crowded with guests, towards a gloomy chaos of black clouds, resembling in its up-soaring a lofty and enormous hillside flower. And in and about this flower, to which the blaze of light gave life, there had gathered a swarm of small, living creatures, attracted by the brightness and by the odour of pleasure. Many vain little moths there were, some fatuous butterflies, many small and inquisitive insects, and some spiteful mosquitoes, while not a few weighty beetles and a host of noble bees produced a continuous buzzing, that was, perhaps, as wearisome to inanimate nature, which lay worshipping there in the surrounding darkness of the night, as the persistent bickering of the sacristan with some silly, chattering old woman would be to the worshippers in a great cathedral. Only the roses, clinging to the balustrade of the terrace on the west, quivered and moved, as if their long domesticity had communicated to them the sense of human enjoyment. Thus said a local poet, who was walking on the terrace, to the lady—herself a native of the place—who leaned upon his arm.

"But do you really think there is much human enjoyment here?" said she. "With the exception of myself and, perhaps, of you also, at the present moment," she added in a languid and sarcastic tone that minimized the tenderness of her words, "all the others are more or less bored. Don't you see how glum they look? For all the world like people who are awaiting their turn in a dentist's anteroom. Fortunately that carrot-coloured man over there seems to be enjoying himself."

The carrot-coloured individual, who was no other than the sour man, was wandering about the rooms all by himself. Clad in a business suit, he was circulating among the diaphanous and delicate-hued toilettes, examining the furniture piece by piece, with a special sneer for each, and was by no means the picture of human enjoyment; but it is only just to state that this handsome gentlewoman, who was intensely aristocratic in taste and intellect, but whose share of this world's goods was but small, suffered more or less at sight of the Dessalles' extravagance—the Dessalles, in whose veins ran only the blood of bankers!—and she was also irritated by what she termed the prostration of the whole city before their millions. Therefore her declaration that all the guests were bored, was necessarily somewhat malicious, and made the poet smile in his own no less malicious heart. When the presentations were over the crowd of guests, many of whom had never before entered the villa, while others had not seen it since its restoration, flowed through the five Tiepolo rooms, and found much to interest them in these magnificent surroundings, where the fastidious gentlewoman found nothing to praise save the frescoes, declaring the furniture to be showy rather than elegant, and finding a trace of vulgarity in everything. She, with a few others, took great delight in criticizing a certain insignificant individual, who was, indeed, both vain and vulgar, and who, having made the Dessalles' acquaintance some weeks before, and having had the opportunity of carefully inspecting the villa, was now going about distributing officious and whispered information.—"The stuffs were all woven to order to harmonize with Tiepolo's decorations.—Everything in this room is antique, and was brought from Rome.—This hall was copied from a hall in Palazzo X in Venice.—The painter Fusarin designed the furniture for this apartment.—The herma of Homer in the music-room is an antique.—The herma of Virgil in the dining-room is the work of a Russian sculptor.—Those of Ariosto and Tasso are by . . . by . . . I will go and ask Carlino at once." After this piece of ridiculous and presumptuous familiarity the facetious cavalier promptly baptized him "Carlino's foster-brother!" and the nickname stuck to him for the rest of the evening.

There were indeed a few competent critics, both male and female, who appreciated the exquisite harmony between the draperies and the frescoes, who paused to admire the gilt frieze upon the white leather of the antique doors, and who did not pass through the corridor between the rooms of Virgil and Tasso without admiring the magnificent Venetian mouldings upon the walls. But most of the guests delighted in other things: in the richly dressed crowd, in the blaze of light, in the display of wealth, and in the very fact that they themselves were among the guests, although this last source of enjoyment was somewhat lessened by the enormous number of invitations that had been issued, and lacked the flavour greater exclusiveness would have imparted. Many of the men were, moreover, delighted at this opportunity of offering their arm to a lady of rank, the intensity of this delight varying according to the social standing, youth and beauty of their companion; while other men were satisfied to plant themselves in a narrow passage between two rooms, and look down searchingly upon the bare shoulders and the palpitations of the women who were sometimes forced to pause there.

"This is our Olympus," said a dapper old gentleman to Gonnelli, in a nasal voice, as four or five ladies passed, the last in a very low gown. Bessanesi, who was standing behind Gonnelli, murmured : "More like Mount Ossa, I should say !"

"Pardon me, what did you say ?" the nasal voice inquired.

"Oh, nothing, nothing !"

All the married women, save a few who were dissatisfied with their toilettes, were highly delighted with the assembly, but the severity and solemnity of their bearing betrayed the fact that they were still greatly preoccupied by their trains, their jewels, and the importance of the event in which they were participating. The girls, on the other hand, were in high spirits, because the "foster-brother" had informed some of them that a canvas had been stretched upon the floor of the lecture-room, and that a piano had been placed there, and also because, among the probable partners, there were some youthful cavalry-men who had never been seen in society before that night. A group of girls was busily commenting upon this news in the Ariosto room when an elderly gallant, happening to pass that way, spread wide his arms and boldly clasped two slender waists, whose owners started violently as the man's nose appeared in the midst of the group.

"Well, well, my pretty dears ! Are we good little girls ? Pious little girls ? How many *Ave Marias* have we said this evening ?" and he darted off laughing, after a tap on the cheek from the eldest damsel's fan.

The girls resumed their discussion of the officers, each producing her bit of information, and the young men were carefully appraised with regard to name, titles, money, age, wit, habits and weight. The championship in weight had long been held by Captain X—— with his ninety-three kilos, but now there was Lieutenant Y——, who weighed ninety-five kilos. It was a pity, for this excess was the lieutenant's sole defect. Jeanne had snatched the *Gonnellina* from a corner of the east terrace, where she was standing with Signorina Bertha and Destemps, and had carried her off to the group of young girls, hoping she might make friends with them. But Eleonora, who had been brought here against her will, was neither lively nor especially gracious, and for this reason the title "Ramrod number one!" was promptly and politely bestowed upon her. Jeanne herself played her part with consummate art, granting but little of her time to those who desired her most, apologizing to her personal friends for her necessary neglect of them, lavishing attentions upon the more humble guests and upon those with whom she was but slightly acquainted, arranging suitable conversations for Professor Dane and Donna Laura, and leaving Bice, Destemps, Bertha, Bessanesi and Gonnelli to their own devices.

Carlino had been obliged to alter the programme for the evening. The lecture was made to yield precedence to the music, because Maestro Bragozzo, who scented a dance, had declared that he would not play the one act of his unpublished opera he had promised them, after the lecture, when every one would be impatient for the ball to begin. There was, moreover, no necessity of going outside the villa for the music, as the Maestro preferred the little hall to the large one in the *Foresteria ;* he preferred a small but attentive audience.

"What can one expect ?" said he to the fastidious Countess. "There are, let us say, one hundred people assembled here. Of fifty men who will applaud my performance, twenty will be likely to say to me when we get outside : 'Fine music, that, Maestro, but rather too long, rather too long !' Twenty more—and these are my good friends—will say : '*Fiol de na pipa !* You son of a pipe, you ! We thought you would never leave off !' Five more will ask me if I have been playing Wagner or La Traviata—it is about the same thing to them. I shall be glad the other five listened to me. As to the ladies, I am willing to except you yourself, Signora De Altes, our hostess also perhaps, but of this I am not sure, and three or four of the fifteen pupils of mine I see here ; let us say ten in all, and that is putting it high ; but the other forty—even had I the power to make the piano sing and weep in turn—will delight me with the sight of forty fans swaying regularly from beginning to end of the performance, like so many metronomes. Some damsel may even dare to say to me, as has happened before when I have been playing Beethoven, Schumann or Mendelssohn : '*Bravo*, Maestro ! But now do play us something pretty !'"

"It is the same the world over, my friend," said the Countess, laughing.

* * * * *

While he was playing—and, contrary to his wish, the little room was crowded, while two long lines of listeners stretched beyond the open doors—the facetious cavalier was describing certain scenes which had taken place at Casa Scremin, to a small group of men and women assembled in a corner of the east terrace. His information was derived from his own parlour-maid, whose sister had married the son of Federico, the Scremins' footman. Well then, scene number one! Actors: Marchese Zaneto, Marchesa Nene, Don Giuseppe Flores and a mouse. Don Giuseppe arrives from his villa, in a carriage. He inquires for the Marchese, is ushered into the presence by Federico, who is ordered to admit no one else. The Marchesa rings the bell. Who has come? Don Giuseppe Flores. Where is he? In the study with the master. Five minutes elapse. The Marchesa leaves her room and wanders restlessly about the house. At last she brings up, frowning and anxious, at one of the two doors of the Marchese's study. What can be going on? Federico finds himself—quite by accident, of course—at the other door. He hears Don Giuseppe's voice, but cannot understand what he is saying. Zaneto is whining. Federico—again quite by accident—applies his eye to the keyhole, and sees his mistress enter, all smiles and amiability. Precisely at this moment the master starts suddenly from his chair, and pulls the bell violently, his gaze riveted upon something in one corner of the study. Federico goes round to the other door, and enters behind his mistress. "Did the Signor Marchese ring?" "There is a mouse over there!" The mistress, who fears naught but the Almighty and mice, turns her back and flees. "A mouse, Signor?" Federico exclaims. "Yes, indeed! A mouse, a mouse!" The Marchese, trembling violently, barricades himself behind his chair. "Pray excuse this interruption, Don Giuseppe. Pray excuse it!" Don Giuseppe is dumb with astonishment at seeing so much fuss made about a mouse. Federico cannot find the mouse.

The Marchese is not satisfied and wishes the search to continue. "Pray excuse me! Pray excuse me, Don Giuseppe! I am so sorry!" And he repeats his "I am sorry!" so often, that poor Don Giuseppe ends by slowly leaving the room. He finds the Marchesa in the anteroom and they converse together.

As the tale reached this mild climax the passionate ravings of Bragozzo's heroes and heroines became more violent than ever, and a stout gentleman came out to the terrace and joined the group. "I am completely deafened!" said he. Then he announced that Zaneto Scremin had just arrived in a tail-coat dating from the year '48, and a white cravat that looked like a table-napkin.

Zaneto's arrival whetted the appetites of the assembled listeners, and the story was resumed. What had passed between the Marchesa and Don Giuseppe was not known, but it was certain that on taking leave of the priest the old lady had said with a sigh: "Of course there must be mice, I suppose!" in excuse, as it were, of the weakness the Almighty had exhibited when He invented those animals. As to the real matter in hand . . .

"I know all about it," said the gentleman who had been deafened. And indeed he proved to be very well informed on the subject. In order to secure his nomination as senator Zaneto must regulate his affairs, and cancel his many small debts by raising a large loan, thus diminishing the amount of interest as well as stopping many chattering mouths, and freeing himself from the scrutiny of his creditors' watchful eyes. He had not been able to arrange with the loan department of the Milan Savings Bank, because the security offered was not sufficient. Zaneto's solicitor had then proposed the affair to Carlo Dessalle, asking for a loan of seven-hundred-thousand *lire* at four per cent. At the time, however, Dessalle had not sufficient unemployed capital, and, at any rate, he demanded four and a half per cent. The Marchesa got wind of this transaction, and rather than allow her husband to bind himself to the Dessalles, had decided to make a sacrifice, and give him the greater part of her own fortune, but only on condition that he should inform those in authority that he no longer aspired to the Senate, and that the family should remove to Brescia, and reside quietly there with the son-in-law. Don Giuseppe had been the Marchesa's ambassador. "But Zaneto stood his ground, and between him and the mouse the plan was frustrated." In the local dialect *sorzo* stands equally for a mouse and for a very astute individual, and upon this philological basis the facetious cavalier rested the not unlikely hypothesis that when he had cried "*un sorzo!*" the worthy Zaneto had intended to allude, not to that harmless animal, but to himself.

Meanwhile Jeanne had presented the Marchese to Donna Laura, and had skilfully turned their faces towards the west terrace, where they would be able to converse undisturbed. The clock at the Sanctuary was just striking half-past ten. Jeanne glided into the dining-room, stationed herself at an open window overlooking the Valley of Silence, and contemplated the gloomy hills and heavy, black clouds, trying to picture to herself that distant terrace, high above the dark waters, to picture the dead passion-flower vine, and to catch the sound of the great bells. She strove to feel the beating of that heart, that was so dear to her, that was so full of memories, of regrets, of fears, of vague longings, all tending to snatch it from her. Her spirit sped to his side, but, conscious that she dare not press him in her arms for fear of arousing his displeasure, a wave of grief swept over her that left her half fainting, and she turned from the window.

As she did so she was confronted by Bassanelli. "Am I indiscreet?" said he. "I thought you might perhaps have ears and eyes for your old friends to-night. I have something to say to you."

Jeanne did not resent the allusion to Maironi's absence, for she had long since grown accustomed to poor Bassanelli's outbursts of jealousy, and, moreover, she not only respected him, but was really fond of him.

"And how about my guests?" said she.

"Bragozzo is taking care of them," Bassanelli replied. "Listen to what I have to tell you. The day before yesterday, in Venice, I met your husband."

Jeanne started with a gesture of passionate scorn. "Well," said she. "And what is that to me?"

Bassanelli had not expected she would care much, but to tell the truth, the man had aroused his pity. He was in wretched health, and seemed completely changed. He was conscious of the foulness of his past life, and he was suffering, suffering deeply, and his torment was enhanced by certain rumours which had reached him.

"What rumours?"

"Alas! You know well enough, my dear girl!"

"Bassanelli, did you come here on purpose to tell me this?" cried Jeanne indignantly.

"No, but I must say the absence of a certain person is far too clearly announced by your expression this evening, and I don't approve of your hanging about open windows and sighing!"

"Bassanelli, I have heretofore allowed you to hector me on this point because you are such an old friend, but have a care not to make me regret my forbearance. It is, moreover, untrue that my expression betrays me. My expression reveals nothing. And, after all, what if it did? I do no wrong!"

Bassanelli, his face pale, gazed steadily and silently into her eyes for an instant. Then he grasped her wrist roughly, and raised her arm.

"You do no wrong?" said he. "Listen! I have always been an ass, ever since the time when I half starved myself and got myself crippled for love of this ungrateful country of ours! I am an ass at the present moment, and I know the reason why; but I swear to you that when I think of poor Franco Maironi, of his father, that man whose heart was as bold as a lion's but—God knows!—as pure as a saint's; when I think of him, I say, and of what he would suffer if he could know, could see, I had rather be the ass I am than you!"

As he pronounced the last words he gave the imprisoned wrist a shake, and then cast it from him. At the same instant they heard the loud outburst of applause that greeted the last bars of Bragozzo's opera.

"Hush!" cried Jeanne, terrified, and almost as pale as Bassanelli himself. "You are simply jealous and cruel, and nothing else!"

She hastened to the Iphigenia room, and he followed quivering with passion, and at once glad and sorry that he had unburthened himself.

Donna Laura and Marchese Scremin were still conversing on one terrace when all the guests poured out in couples upon the other, and went down the steps into the garden, disappearing in the direction of the light that streamed from the door of the *Foresteria*. A few aristocratic couples stepped aside and presently formed a group by themselves, this having been prearranged, in order that they might choose their places in the hall, apart from the common herd. Certain indignant, feminine whisperings in confirmation of this manœuvre at once began to circulate among the shadows. Whisperings were also circulating among those forming the select group: comments upon Maironi's absence, upon the toilettes of the two Florentine gentlewomen, which were pronounced so plain as to be almost insulting. One lady, who had been seated near the door of the music-room, had contrived to fan herself with her right hand, while with her left she cautiously felt the stuffs of all the toilettes that passed, and she was outraged by the avarice of some of her friends. Another took great delight in remarking to Jeanne's two fanatical female admirers, that Maironi's absence made her look positively ugly, and this in order that they might not be deceived concerning the true state of their idol's affections.

Jeanne was the last to enter the lecture-hall with Dane, whom a local wit had already christened *pretoides brachyfera*, in reference to the worldly cut of his trousers and the femininity of his beardless face. As they took their places Carlino, standing beside the sheet that had been prepared for the projections, was explaining to the audience that his discourse, which was of a fanciful nature, demanded a musical introduction. He begged they would refrain from applauding the music, although it was by a great master and would be splendidly executed. At a given moment all the electric lights went out, and banks of clouds illumined by pale moonlight began to appear on the sheet, while a small and invisible orchestra played the first bars of Mendelssohn's "Midsummer Night's Dream." Donna

Bice, good-natured Signora Colomba Raselli, the *Gonnellina*, her father, Dane, Bessanesi and Maestro Bragozzo cried "Oh!" Destemps said "Well done!" in a loud voice, but all the others, both men and women, sat unmoved, with the air of those who are accustomed to the best and are hard to please.

As soon as the music ceased the dark clouds trembled and vanished. A few electric lights shed a pale twilight, and Carlino mounted a small tribune which stretched across the corner of the hall between the sheet and the open door of the room where the musicians were concealed, which room he had christened the "China of Monsters" in reference to its Tiepolesque decorations.

"A regular Punch and Judy box!" whispered the sour man.

"The Gate of Dreams," Carlino began, without emphasis and with that nervous, Tuscan accent of his which in itself was sufficient to convey to these Venetian ears a sense of the strange and magical. "Gate of the Sphinxes, *Jauna Clara!* Appear!"

The lights went out, and upon the sheet there first trembled and then appeared distinctly the picture of a fine gateway of the late Quattrocento. Upon the base of the pilaster on the right were inscribed the words:

JAUNA CLARA.

Some one recognized the motto and the sphinxes and murmured the name of a palace in the city.

"Oh, thou art worthy to grace the palace of Atlantis," Carlino went on; "I choose thee for my introduction. Thy blood-red and still formless members were wrenched from the bowels of some wild mountain by the strength of mighty arms; and, meanwhile, thy pure soul flashed in the soul of the ancient artificer like a glowing spark, until at last, through the laborious conjunction of spirit and stone, thy arch was slowly rounded and shaped, thy arch which is a symbol of a full and rich life, of the path of beauty through time, of hope in the heart of the wise."

"Look at your watch," grumbled the sour man to his neighbour. "Let us see how long it takes him to get through this gate!"

"And even in our own generation," Carlino's voice continued in the shadow, "the crowds of those who pass thee on the day sacred to the thundering Jove, pause to bestow a smile of approval upon thee, ere they enter thy portals and proceed to burn incense before the goddess whom thou concealest."

Here the gateway trembled and disappeared. Amidst an outburst of "ohs," of laughter and of applause, there flashed in its place the bold profile, the great, dark eyes, the massive but exquisite shoulders of a lady who was present in the audience. "She looks rather like Donna Laura," said Professor Dane. Jeanne started. Were Donna Laura and Marchese Scremin in the room, or had they been forgotten on the terrace? While the applause and laughter continued, while the lady was parrying the congratulations of her friends and Carlino was waiting to resume his far-fetched simile between the ornate gateway and the ornate introduction to a romantic fable, Jeanne slipped quickly from the room, and met Donna Laura in the garden, alone. The Marchese (Goodness! What a poor figure of a senator!) had departed, leaving many apologies behind him. Well? Well, Scremin had solemnly undertaken to make his son-in-law work for the Brescia elections. Upon hearing this Jeanne uttered a gentle and doubtful

"Hm!" and Donna Laura made bold to say, smilingly: "It might be done at once, if you would only say the word!" Perhaps the surrounding darkness gave her courage to venture thus far.

"Did Scremin tell you so?" said Jeanne.

"No, but I believe so."

"Well then, it is false!"

And in making this statement Jeanne was convinced of its truth.

"Did he mention his financial embarrassments to you?" she added.

"No. But I mentioned them to him!"

"You never did?"

But then, Donna Laura was famous for her monitory boldness, and her ruthless audacity.

"When the end we have in view is extraordinary, ordinary considerations must be disregarded," said she.

During her conversation with the Marchese she had alluded to certain difficulties which had grouped themselves around his name, difficulties of a very positive nature, and caused by rumours which, though certainly false, it was, nevertheless, imperative to silence without delay. The Marchese had exhibited great embarrassment, and had replied in confused and disconnected language intended to convey the information that certain transactions he had had with the Dessalles must have convinced them of the solidity of his financial position, and that to this they would surely be willing to testify.

"Is that true?" asked Donna Laura.

Jeanne said she believed her brother had indeed been asked to advance a large sum of money, that the security offered had been considered sufficient although not particularly generous, but that the contracting parties had failed to come to terms on the question of interest.

"Well," said Donna Laura, "he has requested me to persuade the Minister to seek information from the Prefect on this point, and he wishes you to speak to the Prefect. However," she added, "you are, of course, aware that I take but little interest in this matter. What interests me is the Brescia campaign."

Jeanne did not answer. Her friend was conscious of the iciness of that silence and of the value of the fleeting moment.

"Excuse me," said she, "but let us discuss this matter openly. I have no desire to pry into your affairs, but, after all, I really think you should help me!"

"Help you still further?"

"Yes, still further. This time he will be making himself known in the borough by working for some one else. Another time he can work for himself, and we will help him."

This inconsiderate language and her tone of patronage irritated Jeanne.

"I beg your pardon," said she, "but you are labouring under a great mistake, and all this talk is to no purpose. Come, I must go back to the hall."

Donna Laura, greatly disappointed, thought to herself: "Can they have quarrelled?" And she determined to find out more about the matter that same night.

Meanwhile Carlino was enjoying an ever increasing success. He had spun the most absurd tale, and round the sour man's mouth a violent contest was going on between the orbicular muscle, the buccinator and the risibles. The slides took the audience by storm, and the subject of the fable was as follows. A very handsome and popular girl belonging to one of the best families, who was really engaged to a foreigner, and was present at the lecture, figured as already married and dwelling in a superb castle on the Rhine near the Lorelei's rock. Her happiness was, however, somewhat marred by the memory of her far-away home, and the Lorelei, moved to pity by her gentle sighing, made her a present of the lofty and ancient tower—the Town Tower—in whose shadow she was born, and caused it to be set up in her garden. There followed an amusing description of the citizens' despair at the loss of their tower, and, regardless of the anachronism, Maironi appeared upon the sheet girt with the *Sindaco's* scarf, and in the act of seeking for the lost edifice by the light of a lantern. Jeanne was distressed by this apparition, at which every one else laughed heartily, and also by the fact that Carlino had not mentioned it, although he had previously related the fable to her. Then there was a slide representing the arrest of an enormously tall man, accused of having swallowed the tower. Another, who had written the "History of the Town Tower, with Notes," was seen fainting away, while several patricians—all friends of Carlino's—were represented in the act of committing suicide by jumping head-foremost into the yawning chasm where the pride of the city had once stood. A council of fairies, the town's protectresses, followed this dramatic episode. Never once in the course of his running comments on the illustrations, did the lecturer pronounce a name, thus remaining faithful to the title he had chosen for his strange rigmarole. But the names were proclaimed by the audience upon the appearance of the different personages. The Lorelei herself was a fine-looking woman from Rolandseck, who, upon her marriage, had come to dwell in the city of the tower. Both Carlino's gallantry and tact were especially apparent in the description by word and picture of the council of fairies, in which the magical powers were attributed to the handsomest and most illustrious ladies of the town, who, described one by one, in prolix but enigmatical language, appeared upon the sheet in forms that were equally enigmatical, and with partially or completely veiled faces. These apparitions would quickly disappear in a rapid flash, and never, in spite of the entreaties of the audience, were the illustrations repeated. Of the thirty-six ladies present, at least thirty-five were secretly convinced that they were among the fairies; even the elderly dames, who placed their trust in their titles and palaces, in the lecturer's gallant courtesy, and in those discreet veils. The council of the fairies was supposed to take place in the palace of the *Jauna Clara*, and by their magic they were able to spirit the tower home again from the banks of the Rhine, bringing the young couple with it, to dwell in its shadow, taking the Lorelei herself prisoner, and then graciously adopting her as their companion and sister. The tale and the slides ended in a mad dance of all the citizens round the reinstated tower, the mayor, the tall man, the historian and even the patrician suicides whirling gaily with the crowd. A hymn in praise of the charming and hospitable city, the favourite haunt of genius and grace, brought the lecture to a merry close. The little orchestra played a popular tune, taking it in such slow time as to render it not only intensely solemn, but at first, indeed, almost unrecognizable, while upon the sheet there appeared the likeness of Carlino himself, bending respectfully towards the audience, his arms crossed and a small tower pressed to his breast. Suddenly all the lights blazed brightly forth, as the guests broke into deafening applause.

The hall was quickly cleared for dancing, and a few were already promenading there, but most of the guests were smoking cigarettes or eating ices in the crowded rooms overlooking the Valley of Silence. These apartments also contained frescoes in Tiepolo's most fantastic style, and each had been christened by Carlino according to the subject of its decorations. There was the China of Monsters, the Room of the Georgics, the Hall of Gallantry, Olympus, the Hall of Darwin and the Chamber of Anacreon. The success of the lecture had been such that only the young girls seemed anxious for the dancing to begin, and there was a great uproar going on around Carlino and those fairies whose identity had been established beyond a doubt.

Donna Laura took the arm of one of these, a little, restless, nervous fairy, who had been at school with her at Poggio Imperiale, and, with the pretext of wishing to examine the work of Tiepolo, allowed herself to be conducted to the Chamber of Anacreon, that gem of a room containing the cherubs, last on the east, and now completely deserted. Here Donna Laura at once began questioning her friend about the intimacy between Jeanne and Maironi.

"Why, there is nothing more said about it!" said the flippant fairy, sparkling with delight at having been able to show herself arm in arm with the great lady. "Do you ask because you do not see him here? He is at Brescia, on business. It is an accepted fact, you know, a sort of marriage. People do say that she might sometimes be a little more careful, might act more as he does—he is perfect—but, after all, we must really consider their position. . . . A husband without a wife . . . a wife without a husband . . . and it is not their fault, either. . . . Then they are both young, and—let us be quite honest, which it is so difficult to be!—it is most fortunate that they have happened to fall in love with each other, instead of spoiling other unions! Every one who is truly moral without being hypocritical must agree with me! There are some who blame Dessalle, and say he should do things, or say things! Oh, he is such a delightful fellow, Dessalle! So perfectly delightful! But the people here are very proper and pedantic. You have no idea how severe they are! However, they are by no means always just; they will forgive one person everything and another person nothing!"

In speaking thus she seemed to insinuate half resentfully, half complacently, that she herself had experienced both this severity and this injustice. She was, in fact, one of those who gladly stretch out their hand towards the forbidden fruit, but who, at the moment of grasping it, feel themselves—albeit with a shade of regret—more honest than they had believed, and the hand is withdrawn.

The ball was at its height; the "foster-brother" had disgraced himself by upsetting a quadrille, and a group of sedate men, town councillors belonging to the Liberal party, were smoking and discussing the coming elections on the terrace near the Chamber of Anacreon. A telegram from the deputy had just announced to them the dissolution of the Council.

Donna Bice had discovered an old friend in the person of the wife of Alberto D'Ambiveri, a major of artillery. This young matron, a Roman by birth, had a kind heart, but a terrible tongue in her lighter moments. Seated upon a Chinese divan beside Bice, she had a nickname or a mischievous comment for every one of the women and for many of the men who passed them on their way to the ball-room. Of course Bice knew no one, and Signora D'Ambiveri was only too happy to present them to her, in an undertone. "Miss . . . Turnip — Count . . . Pompous Gander — Miss . . . Prunes and Prisms, look, but don't handle—Countess . . . Propriety, look, and handle if you like—Signora . . . Sensibility, look and handle both—Countess . . . Blood Royal, Empress of Nowhere—Lieutenant . . . Money Gone—Master and Miss . . . Squirrel —Madame . . . Virtue Personified." When Destemps passed with their hostess upon his arm, she could not refrain from murmuring: "All hail! to Piero's successor!" Donna Bice smiled knowingly, and hastened to inquire about Maironi. Was he really so fascinating?

"He is not a favourite here," said Signora D'Ambiveri. "They think him too serious-minded. This love affair has indeed given many a better opinion of him, but it is not enough. He would do well to drop Jeanne now, and take some one else."

"Would you like to be that some one?"

"I? What an idea! Poor Alberto! But I can quite understand Jeanne's weakness for him. For you must know that Maironi is most distinguished in appearance, without being handsome; he dresses well, without being a fashion-plate; and I don't believe he is the sort of man to make you a declaration before he has known you two hours. Add to all this that this man—considering the stick of a wife he had, and the life he has led—must have lavished perfect treasures of untarnished passion upon Jeanne. In a word, I understand Jeanne perfectly, and pray don't make me say anying more that is foolish!"

IV

A sudden peal of thunder brought the ball to an abrupt close. In vain Bertha Rothenbaum, with all the assurance of the good-natured and experienced old maid, begged some of the girls to wait for the rain and baptize a handsome young Jew, who danced divinely; the carriages had been announced and the guests fled. One by one the couples of carriage lamps detached themselves from the moving confusion of lights that shone in front of the villa, and rolling swiftly along the drive below the encircling wall, disappeared in the darkness. Another peal of thunder re-echoed through the shadows of the garden, and rolled in through the open windows, filling the halls of the villa like the awe-inspiring voice of a threatening Master, who, from out his dark tent of clouds, was calling all this human vanity, and all these terrified and silent things to account for having so completely forgotten him. The windows were closed, and at last the sound of the steps and voices of the servants was hushed. Leaning against the balustrade of the balcony outside her bedroom, Jeanne, tired, indeed, but wakeful, listened unconsciously to the trembling of the restless branches below her, and watched the ceaseless and silent flashing of the lightning along the murky comb of the hills, like the continuous and feverishly rapid opening and shutting of a great fiery eye in the sky. She was revelling in the freedom of solitude, in the delicious relief from an unbearable burthen of pretence. Had Maironi been present during the evening she would have felt only the delight of being admired before him for her beauty, her grace, the magnificence of her hospitality. Mentally she would have offered him everything, all the grateful homage of her guests! Even in his absence she could have offered it to him joyfully, were it not for that painful letter. But, as it was, those long hours had brought her only weariness and anxiety. Never before had humanity seemed to her so foolish and so false, never before had she herself seemed so foolish and so false. The noise of the thunder, the rustling of the branches, the continuous flashing of the lightning were a relief to her, their sincerity contrasting with all the simulation she had so recently witnessed and practised. Besides he also loved these sounds. Good God! what awful things Bassanelli had said! His father! Formerly she would have smiled at the thought, but not now! It had begun to rain quietly and silently. She withdrew from the balcony and opened the drawer of her writing-desk. The letter was there, lying beside the silver box in which Jeanne kept his other letters, her greatest treasures. She was in the habit of reading some of them every night, and the odour of heliotrope that escaped from the open box repeated to her those intensely sweet words to which she was wont to turn. But not to-night, alas! To-night her eyes must rest upon the sad words.

" . . . when, for a moment, I heard the faint sound of great bells, which seemed infinitely remote. The sound came from above, and I cannot express to you the impression it produced there in that black darkness, in that intense silence. I listened with my hand to my ear, and holding my breath. I heard nothing more. That is, only a voice near me saying in the dialect of the country: 'Those are the bells of Puria.' It was the caretaker, the *Sindaco* of Albogasio. I thought he had grown weary with waiting for me, and told him he could go to bed. 'Leu is here,' said he. 'Leu?' I asked. 'At this hour?' 'It is indeed strange,' he replied, 'but she is slightly . . . and he finished the sentence with a smile and the familiar gesture of the hand raised to the forehead. 'She has often inquired lately when you were coming,' he added, 'for she says she has something to tell you, something about the old days; but when I ask her what it is she always declares she cannot tell any one but you. However, I think she is quite . . .' I ordered him to admit the woman, and presently I heard Leu's voice repeating: 'Do you understand? Do you understand that you are not to stay here and listen? Eh? Do you understand?' And so the mayor took himself off laughing.

"The old woman began by offering me a basket of unripe plums and then held forth at great length concerning my good health and her own poor health; she chattered of the desire to see me that had tormented her, and of her fear of dying before my arrival, as well as of the wickedness of her relatives and especially of the caretaker, Tognin, who believed her to be mad. She was moved to tears when she told me, as she always does, about the cup of coffee she brought my father to the very spot where we were then standing, the night he came secretly from Lugano by way of the hills, and found my poor little sister dead. I believed she had nothing new to tell me, and that she would end by asking me for money, so I encouraged her to repeat many things about my parents which I am always glad to hear from her lips, and led her on to make a certain declaration with which I am familiar: 'You are a fine gentleman and a good gentleman, but your ancestors were twice as fine and good as you!' At last she informed me that she was afraid Tognin would scold her if she stayed too long, and that she must give me what she had for me at once.

"Then she began to tell me of what happened in my parents' house during the last days of my mother's life, and immediately after her death, which took place on the twenty-sixth of January, 1862. One day when the *breva* was blowing violently, she went up to her native village of Castello, and, on her way home, stopped at the cemetery, where she took the terrible cold which developed into pneumonia and caused her death. According to Leu's account, the house was then literally sacked. It was full of people all the time, and all helped themselves to what they wanted. My father had died two years before, and I myself was only a little over two years old. My grandmother, however, soon sent an agent from Brescia who closed the house, appointed a caretaker (Tognin's father) and carried me away with him.

"Leu maintains that this agent gave her the furniture of the bedroom she had occupied and a small table which she swears my poor mother had promised her. In the drawer of this table she found a large portfolio, which my mother had once embroidered for my Uncle Ribera. She says it contained no money, and, believing it to be empty, she preserved it only in memory of the 'Signor Ingegnere.' Last winter a notary from Porlezza happened to come to Oria, and Leu, who owns a small house, a bit of woodland, and has saved a little money, determined to make her will—who knows, perhaps her conscience pricked her!—and leave me the furniture and the portfolio, which she showed the notary. He opened it, and found that it contained some documents. These he hastily examined, and told the old woman to restore them to me at once, because, although they were of no value to her, they would certainly be of interest to me. She now begged me to accept both documents and portfolio, adding that she had hidden it in her basket on account of Tognin. At this point she drew it from beneath the plums, and presented it to me.

"I dismissed her as soon as possible and went up to my room in great excitement, locking the door behind me. I had, of course, brought the precious portfolio with me. After all, it can hardly be called a portfolio, but is really a sort of letter case mounted in black velvet, upon which are embroidered, in gold, the words, 'Ingegnere Pietro Ribera.' It is furnished with many pockets, and in one of these I found the papers.

"Oh, Jeanne, Jeanne! What wonderful reading! At first I felt only tender and gentle emotion, but later a storm of hot and oppressive grief swept over me!

"I concluded that my uncle had never used the portfolio, and that after his death, which took place at Isola Bella some months before I was born, my poor mother used it as a sort of reliquary.

"The first papers I chanced upon were some letters that had passed between my parents when my father was in exile and my mother was living at Oria with my little sister, Uncle Piero and his housekeeper. They had barely enough to support them, and my father, in Turin, was even worse off. These letters are full of animation and freshness, especially my mother's, which often made me smile. They contain bright touches of humour, and some character sketches that are intensely vivid, while her mode of expression is simple and unpretentious. My father's style is more studied. The venerable figure of Uncle Piero, the sweet figure of little *Missipipì*, as my baby sister Maria is called in these letters, stand out boldly, full of sweetness and grace. Ah! and it is all so simple! As I read I experienced a great homesickness, as it were, for that world of poverty and purity, and a great loathing of this world of ours; not only of that ultra-fashionable sphere in which you live, but also for that other sphere in which I was brought up, that world of the Scremins, of old-fashioned wigs and powder, of private niggardliness and a public display of liveries. And then a further revelation surprised and moved me: the revelation that my father and mother had differed widely in their religious views. It appears to me that my mother held practically the same opinions which I profess at present. My father, on the other hand, was a firm believer. But how much life there was in his faith, how much purity and warmth, and what humble and tender affection for his unbelieving companion! There was none of the arrogance of those who pretend to be in sole possession of the truth; his was faith, simple faith, the faith of one who believes just as a plant turns towards the sun, because it cannot do otherwise. I also discovered some less interesting letters from my uncle and from Grandmother Rigey, and there was an envelope containing a lock of my little sister's hair. How the sight of this moved me after what I had just read about her, poor darling! But the thought of my parents' grief affected me still more deeply. Then there was another envelope, upon which my dear mother had written the words: Precious relics.

"I opened it. It contained only a few ashes in a sheet of white paper. Precious relics! What could this be? I thought and thought, and at last the conviction was borne in upon me, filling me with ineffable reverence, that these were the ashes of my father's love-letters. Ah, Jeanne, what a great thing, what a great revelation, what pure and holy ashes! How grand my parents' union had been, and this thought was at once sweet and bitter to me! I felt I was suffocating, was being borne away from the world of the living, and cast among the shadows of the world of long ago. I was obliged to throw open the window, and I stood there for many minutes, with my hands resting on the sill, breathing in the night air, thinking of nothing, but still dimly conscious of the reality of the things of the present. There were only two more papers to be examined. I was doubtful whether to read them or not. I felt exhausted, felt that I was incapable of approaching these relics with the attention they deserved. At last, however, I conquered this sense of reverence. The first of these documents dealt with a very important matter of business, so important, indeed, as to profoundly influence the future course of my life. But this is not the moment to speak of it. The other was a simple sheet of paper, at the top of which my poor mother had traced the words:

"A prayer composed for my use, by him, on a day of great happiness.'

"The prayer is a short one, Jeanne, but I cannot copy it out. Perhaps some day I may be able to do so; in the present dark and stormy state of my soul I am not fit for the task. I cannot allow my hand to trace my father's pious words while my intellect still refuses to accept their message. The 'day of great happiness' was the fifteenth of October, 1859. My parents' souls had been reunited in the same faith by an act of sincere devotion, upon the festival of St. Theresa, poor Grandmother Rigey's patron saint. My father was feeling better, and hope, only too soon to be shattered, had sprung up within and around him. His words are very sweet, and I, who was about to come into the world, am remembered in the prayer.

"When the sheet dropped from my hands and I turned instinctively towards the open window to gaze upon the same objects my parents had gazed upon, I once more heard the faint sound of great bells, that seemed immeasurably remote. Oh, Jeanne! I heard my father's voice in those bells! His sad, reproachful voice! Do you understand?

"I shall leave on Saturday by the early boat, by way of Lecco and Rovato. But first I wish to seek for information concerning many things and persons of the world of long ago. Good-bye. What plans have I for you, for myself in the future? As yet I am undecided. But would it have been honourable, would it have been possible for me to hide from you all these things, and the painful storm that is raging within me?"

* * * * *

The fairies—happy in the memory of their night of triumph—who, at that moment, were discussing the entertainment with their sleepy handmaidens, praising Jeanne's *coiffure*, in order to incite them to emulation, certainly did not suspect that she, whose triumph had been still greater, was sitting enveloped in a loose gown, her magnificent hair flowing over her shoulders, and weeping silently, like the night, her head bowed upon her clasped hands, that concealed a letter.

CHAPTER VI

VENA DI FONTE ALTA

I

ON Saturday the early train from Milan reached Rovato twenty minutes late, a delay having been caused at Treviglio by the necessity of adding an extra carriage. Jeanne had telegraphed to Maironi from Milan on Friday morning, informing him of her intention of leaving the next day by that train, and expressing her anxious hope of meeting him at Rovato, where the train he would take from Lecco arrives at the same time as the Venice express. No answer had reached her. As a matter of fact the telegram did not call for an answer, nevertheless all Jeanne's anxieties were now united in the great dread that she might not find Maironi at Rovato. She had gone to the station very early, and had installed herself in an empty carriage; but, much to her discomfort, five other travellers joined her before the moment of departure arrived. The train was crowded, and it was impossible to make a change for the better. Her companions were, moreover, Italians, and especially talkative and inquisitive. Two disagreeable women, very fashionably dressed, amused themselves by studying her toilette, while a still more disagreeable and fashionably dressed man was studying Jeanne herself.

She had chosen a seat in the left-hand corner of the compartment, and as soon as the locomotive whistled upon nearing the station of Rovato, she rose to her feet, and stood gazing out of the window, with an intensely pale face. Ah, there he was, and his eyes were seeking her! She smiled and beckoned to him, telling him there was room in her compartment. In her smile, in her greeting, she appeared far more composed than he; but presently, behind the broad back of the porter who was arranging Piero's luggage in the net, her face assumed an expression of intense anguish, and standing close to him, she whispered: "Have mercy upon me!"

The opposite corner was occupied, so Piero sat down beside her, and they exchanged a few indifferent and formal remarks. He was surprised to see she had taken a ticket for Venice. Why for Venice? Yes, indeed! Jeanne smiled, and spreading a newspaper before her face, whispered behind it: "In order not to compromise you," and her eyes filled with tears. She bit her lip, but quickly controlled herself, and, smiling brightly once more, began telling him of the entertainment at Villa Diedo that had been such a success, and of her brother's whimsical fairy tale. Piero could not follow her, and did not even inquire the subject of the tale, but Jeanne talked steadily on. Carlino intended to return from Milan on Tuesday. On Thursday, or, at latest, on Saturday he would go away again with her. Where were they going? To Vena di Fonte Alta—the pretty name of a beautiful mountain resort. Carlino had had a drop of blood analysed, and had insisted upon the doctor's pricking Jeanne's finger and examining her blood also. The doctor had found an insufficiency of red globules in both, and had advised a visit to Recoaro. But Jeanne would not hear of Recoaro, of St. Moritz, nor of any other waters, and so they had decided to go to Vena simply for a change of air. Piero did not know where Vena was, nor by what road it might be reached. They discussed this point in low tones. Vena was five hours from the city, two hours of train and three of carriage; it lay one thousand metres above the level of the sea, and offered the attractions of pine-groves, beech-groves, solitude and quiet. The Dessalles had already engaged four rooms at the one small hotel the place boasted. There were six more vacant. Jeanne said this almost timidly. Piero made no answer, and the conversation languished. Both gazed out of the same window at the flying verdure, glistening in the sunshine, conscious that at a certain point in those fields running parallel with the railway their glances met, were united, and hastened forward together. Perhaps their secret thoughts met also in the rhythmic clatter that was carrying them along. It was very hot. At Brescia Piero offered Jeanne a refreshing drink, which she accepted—not, however, because she was thirsty—with a smile so grateful, so humble, so eloquent that the traveller seated opposite her immediately glanced at the eyes of the man upon whom this beautiful woman smiled thus.

"And how about the elections?" said she.

At first Piero did not seem to understand. Ah, yes! His father-in-law had both written and telegraphed to him at Brescia, entreating him to take part in the campaign, or, at least, to persuade others to do so. The telegram and letter had been forwarded to him at Valsolda. It was precisely for this reason that he was determined not to stop at Brescia, not even between two trains. In the Lonato tunnel Jeanne took his hand, and pressed his bare wrist to her lips and to her eyes that were wet with tears. The hand yielded, neither resisting nor reciprocating her tenderness. The tunnel passed, both gazed out of the window once more at the smiling hills, but a slight tremor betrayed them. When the lofty, mist-veiled mountains and the blue waters of Garda appeared, Jeanne asked :

" What was your lake like this morning ? "

Piero said he had left it in a dramatic mood, all trembling diamonds and blue mists towards the east, and all darkest green beneath great, threatening, black clouds in the west. He described the struggles between light and shadow upon the mountains that surround the lake, speaking with much animation and eloquence, as if in compensation for the silence he must perforce maintain concerning another mighty struggle. Jeanne ventured to ask a question.

" How did you leave a certain person ? " said she, with an almost imperceptible movement of her head in his direction.

Piero sighed, and answered with a silent gesture of despairing incertitude.

" Oh, God ! " she exclaimed sadly, speaking rather to herself, but, nevertheless, she experienced a sense of inward relief, and added : " The case is so different ! "

Piero questioned her with his eyes, and presently she inquired how long the train would stop at . . . Twenty minutes. Piero understood, and hastened to inform her that he had an appointment with Dr. . . . at that station, and would be obliged to remain with him all the time. Jeanne knew the doctor by name, and was aware that he had charge of the mad woman. She heartily acquiesced in this arrangement, showing how willing she was to subordinate her own wishes, herself even, to the interest it was his duty to display in his wife's condition.

"Yes, yes, that is right," said she.

And once more she sought to meet his glance, his dear soul, out there on the calm waters of Garda. She had feared the worst, but now she felt there was indecision in that soul, and she hoped, hoped passionately, ready to make any sacrifice joyously, to see him less often, to deny herself the delight of caresses, the sweetness of the familiar *thou*, should he demand these things, if only she might keep his love, if only he would not leave her! She hoped in fear and trembling, covering the wavering spark with gentle sadness, and hiding it in her heart. Piero was indeed still undecided. While writing to Jeanne he had been shaken by a stormy return of the faith of his youth, by a paroxysm of grief and affection, an ineffable striving of the spirit towards God. When the first violence of this wave had spent itself, he had hastened to place himself on the defensive against his own nature, against his mystic tendencies, against everything that might lead him astray from the path he was resolved to travel, the path of an apostolate in the cause of social justice, an apostolate containing no hatred of the Catholic Church, but, at the same time, entirely independent of her. This was the path his mother might have dreamed of his following at the time when her sole belief was in the idea of justice, when she worshipped that idea alone. He recognized in himself the blood of both his parents, recognized the renewal of their fatal conflict. He entertained a suspicion that his mother's submission had been the outcome rather of love and pity than of honest conviction. Immediately, however, he remembered her perfect loyalty and her proud spirit. How could she have lied? But, nevertheless, the suspicion would return. It was, moreover, most painful to him to struggle thus against his father's blood. There flashed across his mind certain vague images of a solitary life of contemplation in the home of his fathers, comforted by religious practices, and he recalled Don Giuseppe Flores' advice. But he quickly rid himself of these dreams. Little by little the conviction was borne in upon him that this struggle would prove decisive; that, should he win the day, he would remain for ever firmly grounded in the more rational conception of life and of life's end; that, freed from the bonds of dogma and of creed, but entirely devoted to a just cause, the blood of his father would at last be pacified, and this all the more easily if he himself should put into execution a brave resolve, should make a certain great sacrifice to justice, the reason and plan for which he had found in the portfolio, but had not disclosed to Jeanne. But even should she, from a distance, have read in his soul this victory of the rational element over the mystical, she would find in it but slight cause for rejoicing. Was his love compatible with a social apostolate such as Piero dreamed of? Was he not bound to sacrifice this weak passion for a woman who was incapable of grasping the grandeur and beauty of his scheme? His mother, in her austere virtue, would be inexorable towards one who, yielding to passion, should break, if only for a time, the faith he had sworn, and bind himself by unavowable ties, ties that might be concealed only by lies.

Seated on Friday afternoon upon the low wall of the kitchen garden, among the roses his father had planted, and which seemed to him so much more sweetly spiritual than their bold and voluptuous sisters at Villa Diedo, he was musing upon the fact that had Jeanne not resisted him, he would never more have been able to leave her, when her telegram from Milan was brought to him. The telegram irritated him. He had no desire to meet Jeanne so soon, before having reached a final decision concerning the path he must follow. Reflecting upon this unpleasant impression, he asked himself: "Do I still love her?" and immediately he felt within him the coldness of the answer, the fear of possible hypocrisy on his part. On several previous occasions, however, when he had encountered her scepticism, or the spirit of contradiction that possessed her, he had thought he no longer loved her, but this had been but a passing coldness. Should he start the next morning, or should he remain? He ended by telling himself that it would be wiser to face this meeting, which he half dreaded, without delay. As he went thoughtfully towards the house where a gardener from Lugano was waiting to consult him about the creepers that were to replace the dead passion-flower vine, he could not refrain from comparing his own sentiment, even as it had been in former days, with Jeanne's, and he was forced to admit its inferiority in strength and loftiness, and to doubt whether that first meeting in the train would not have remained a simple episode, had it not been for her passionate advances in the very beginning, and for his own blind longing for liberty, for life, for love.

When the hour of departure arrived on Saturday morning, the voices of sacred memories, the tender voices of his surroundings, once more touched his heart as they had touched it on that memorable night. The orange tree and mandarin in the little garden, the roses and the towering pine in the kitchen garden, all seemed to be looking towards him with that gentle agonized gaze of mute sufferers as the steamer carried him past them. The farther he journeyed from these surroundings the more strength the calls of the present acquired against the calls of the past, and of this lonely and peaceful retreat; but as the train sped rapidly along the Porlezza Valley he suddenly recalled the premonitory sense of trouble which he had experienced while passing that spot a few days ago, a feeling which had remained with him to his journey's end. Had he then been drawn to Valsolda by a supernatural power? Or had the first impulse to go there arisen from a forgotten dream? Had Jeanne's insistence and his own habit of visiting the lake every spring, perhaps caused the dream? When the train had passed Grandola, and there appeared in the west that swelling bosom of sky upon earth which—beyond the sharply outlined hills of Bellagio—sweeps down between two wings of mountains, in its rapid flight towards Lecco, Piero started as if Jeanne herself had appeared before him, and henceforth all his thoughts were of her, and of the meeting that was fast approaching. As he walked up and down the platform waiting for the train from Milan, his heart beat violently, but when, at last, he saw Jeanne he began to feel more calm. He was glad she was not alone. Although he had expected it in one form or another, her murmured prayer: "Have mercy upon me!" went to his heart. She was very lovely in her gown of *crêpe crême* trimmed with black velvet, her Rembrandt hat with its black plume, her black gloves and the two broad bands of plain gold that encircled her wrists. The gentle fire of her great, liquid eyes was full of entreaty, and although her arm was withdrawn timidly from a slight contact with his, it was with a perceptible heaving of her bosom and an accompanying glance of infinite sweetness. When, in the darkness of the tunnel, she had kissed his wrist, and pressed it to her eyes that were wet with tears, he had experienced no voluptuous delight, but rather a sense of reverent tenderness. Who else would ever love him with such humble and mighty love? Was such love not worthy of respect, like everything else in the world? And what would be the result if she should say to him presently: "I am no longer sceptical; I now share your ideals; my ardour for them is as great as your own, and I would stand out against you should you seek to sacrifice your duty to your love!"

At the station of . . . , which is the one immediately preceding that at which Piero had appointed to meet the doctor, the traveller who had occupied the seat opposite Jeanne left the train, and Piero rose to draw up the window. The doctor was on the platform, and catching sight of him, quickly entered the carriage and sat down beside him. That he might not appear to be in Jeanne's company, Piero had taken the vacant seat. It at once occurred to him that the doctor, thinking they were among strangers, might speak unguardedly of the matter in hand, and he was on the point of presenting him to Jeanne, or of speaking to her himself, but finally decided not to do so. As Maironi asked no questions, the doctor looked about him, and did not speak until the train had started, when he said, in an undertone:

"I have some slight news for you, but unfortunately it is unfavourable."

Piero answered, in an equally low voice:

"You shall tell me presently."

His eyes and Jeanne's met in a fleeting and questioning glance. At the next station Maironi and the physician got out, and Jeanne lost sight of them in the hurrying crowd. Maironi returned to the carriage five minutes before the train started. Jeanne was alone. She had changed her seat, and now occupied the right-hand corner with her back to the locomotive. She had made this change for the same reasons of prudence that had prompted her to continue her journey as far as Venice, and in order that she might avoid all danger of being seen when he should leave the carriage by the door on the left, for perhaps there might be some one at the station to meet him. She was taking these precautions on his account, and they were new, sadly new to her.

"Come, come, come!" said she softly, and, when Piero was seated beside her, she rested her head upon his shoulder, and, taking his hand, pressed it to her heart, quickly forgetting all precautions, as was her nature, and answering all his prudent remonstrances in a voice choked with emotion and tears. "It does not matter, it does not matter!" she said, "only don't leave me, don't leave me! How you have hurt me! Good God! how you have hurt me! Don't you see how different it is? Don't you see that your marriage, your union, is not, never could have been like your parents' union? I also love them, darling, those dear ones of yours, who have passed away. I love them dearly! But why should they wish me to be driven to despair?—Never mind! There is no one here!—Why, why will you not let me speak? What harm have I done them, poor, unhappy creature that I am? Is it my fault that they are dead, and that I, poor unhappy creature, am alive to love you so fondly, to love you only, to think of you only, to live for you alone, my darling, darling love . . . ?"

She paused, raised her head for a moment, and was about to encircle her lover's neck with her arms, when he checked her; some one was entering the compartment. Jeanne composed herself, and the train started. She remained silent, her eyes overflowing with tears, until they reached the next station. Then she whispered:

"Was that the doctor?"

"Yes."

"What news is there?"

"Some further signs of intelligence, but they are slight and fleeting, and tears, many tears, whereas formerly she never cried. Her bodily health is much impaired, and she grows steadily weaker."

There was sorrow in Piero's low tones.

"I do indeed wish she might recover, Piero," said Jeanne. "Don't think I am wicked."

He pressed her hand so tight that she trembled with joy. For some time no word passed between them. Jeanne it was who broke the silence at last.

"You will surely come to Vena?"

"Perhaps. . . ."

"Yes, yes, you must!" Now she had courage to insist. "Will you not promise? What are your plans for the summer?"

"My plans? I intend going on a long journey, but not for the summer only. I refer to the journey I have mentioned to you before."

Jeanne made a little grimace that was half pained and half angry.

"Still that same idea?" said she, in one of her inexplicable fits of revolt against others and against herself, and never dreaming how fatally ill-timed was this outburst of hers. Piero flushed hotly. He looked towards their fellow-passenger, and deliberately and obstinately kept his head turned in that direction, while she—who had already repented of her folly—was heaping reproaches upon herself, begging for forgiveness, supplicating, entreating, with a feverishly rapid flow of words, uttered in an undertone. At last he noisily spread open a newspaper, and said sternly: "Enough!"

Jeanne obeyed at once, and Piero, feeling that he had been too severe, was filled with remorse.

"Never speak thus to me again," said he gently.

She did not answer; she was weeping with her face towards the window.

Piero murmured behind his newspaper: "Now it is my turn to beg your pardon!"

"Thank you!" said Jeanne, so softly that he hardly caught the words, but without turning from the window.

Still more tenderly he continued: "If you can help it, do not even think those thoughts again."

Her only answer was: "I wish I could die!"

He had not the courage to reply, and both seemed to become absorbed in the rhythmic throbbing which, during this terrible silence of theirs, was measuring the swift flight of the moments of anguish.

When the train began to move more slowly, and Piero rose to collect his luggage, Jeanne found a means of once more asking for his promise to come up to Vena, speaking in a low tone and with clasped hands. He hesitated, but she gazed at him with a look of such ineffable entreaty in her eyes that he gave the promise she craved. Then she would have him repeat it solemnly, and she kissed his dear hand with sweet and humble gratitude. Thus they parted.

II

Piero immediately communicated the news of her daughter to the Marchesa, doing his best to soften the more distressing parts. She received him affectionately, and listened to his recital with her usual calm, and then placidly, almost smilingly, gave expression to her faith: "I am sure the Lord will heal her!" as if her ears had been closed to all save the few words of encouragement. Tears trembled in her eyes, tears of joy at her son-in-law's action, at the emotion which was evident beneath his composure; tears of anguish, also, at the words she had seemed to overlook. She begged him to remain and dine with her, but he declined, for he was in no mood to enjoy his father-in-law's society, and he felt sure Zaneto would immediately introduce the question of the Brescia elections. He longed, moreover, to be alone. Then the Marchesa insisted upon calling her husband, that he might hear the news of Elisa from Piero himself. In talking with her son-in-law she had always striven to guide him through the intricate windings of Zaneto's soul, by the light of a small, rose-tinted lamp she herself carried, pointing out, one by one, all the refinements, all the exquisite delicacy of thought and intention which others could not trace in certain acts and words of his, and which, indeed, were often simply the reflection of virtues that were burnt into the glass of her own lantern. "All the rest," she would conclude in her strange, elliptical style, meaning many things, and probably including the senatorial ambitions, "all the rest is just for amusement!"

Zaneto came, was effusively affectionate to his son-in-law, and, having listened to the report, began to sob noisily. When Piero left the room he accompanied him, and stopping him on the landing, asked, his voice still full of tears, if he had received a letter from Avvocato Marchiaro. No, Piero had received no letter. Then Zaneto swallowed and coughed over and over again, hesitating between his desire to speak and the consciousness that the moment was ill-chosen.

"Well, well!" said he at last, checking his swallowing and coughing, "you are sure to hear from him." And then he brought the conversation round to Brescia. Had Piero taken any steps?

"I am sorry to say I have not," Piero replied resolutely, expecting to be called upon to explain his conduct. But Zaneto did not demand an explanation. He turned upon his heel and trotted away, his shoulders bent, and accompanying his trot with a string of "Well, well, wells."

* * * * *

In the afternoon, while Piero was busy with the letters that had been forwarded from Brescia while he was at Valsolda, the Marchesa entered his room. The first words she uttered, as if announcing a most important and interesting piece of news, were: "Papa cried dreadfully after you left, poor man!"

Piero, vexed by the old lady's eternal circumlocutions, saw at once that she was not come solely to communicate this fact to him. To tell the truth, she had guessed the hidden causes that had moved Zaneto to follow Piero to the landing, and, fearing her son-in-law might have been unfavourably impressed by his importunities, which were both ill-timed and out of place, she now wished to efface any such impressions by passing over them the sponge of her own optimism, wet with Marchese Zaneto's tears. But there was something besides this. During dinner—which was a mere feint, for she ate nothing—she had devised what she considered a clever scheme for winning Piero away from Villa Diedo, now that he appeared so well disposed. Therefore, having told him of the tears, she added, with her usual incoherence, that Zaneto would like to go there, but that she thought he had better not.

"Go where ?" said Piero, adding rather mischievously : "To Brescia ?"

"No, no ! To what's its name, to . . ."

The old lady mentioned the place of suffering. Piero remained silent, and after a long and awkward pause, she said :

"There, there !"

Piero felt that she was struggling among the brambles of a lengthy discourse, but he had no desire to help her. However, when the footman came in to light the gas he quickly dismissed him, this being, in a way, an invitation to speak. His mother-in-law simply inquired if he was satisfied.

"What with, mamma ?"

"With the footman."

He made some vague answer, and once more they lapsed into silence. For the sake of doing something, Piero tore up some envelopes and threw them into the waste-paper basket, whereupon the Marchesa cleverly remarked: "Letters. I have had one also."

Then she began a confused story about a letter she had received from the villa in which she was preparing an apartment for her daughter when she should be well enough to leave the asylum. The caretaker's children had the measles, "So it seems to me that it will not do," said she. Here at last was a slight clue to the hidden tangle of her thoughts.

"What will not do, mamma?"

"To take her there."

Piero was about to ask, "Take who there?" but he checked himself in time, concluding that she must mean Elisa. Once more they were silent.

"Is there any illness at what's-its-name?"

"Where?"

"At Valsolda."

He was astonished at the unexpected word, at the unexpected proposal that glinted through the Marchesa's incoherent ramblings.

"I do not know," he answered, and he saw himself once more in the mystic country, in the house that was full of consciousness, on the terrace beloved of Uncle Piero and little Missipipì, saw himself surrounded by solitude and silence with his wife by his side, his wife, who was bewildered and as one just awakened from a dream. But this vision lasted but an instant. The dream of the present was Elisa's recovery. At last the Marchesa confessed her secret thought. Could not her son-in-law return at once to Valsolda, and put the house into condition to receive her at any season, even in winter. She who had never seen Valsolda talked about it as if she had been perfectly familiar with the place, piecing together scraps of information she had gleaned long ago, and which, albeit in a sadly muddled state, had remained in her memory. Thus she placidly mistook the house at Oria for the house at Cressogno, the Lake of Como for the Lake of Lugano, and hopelessly confused Italy and Switzerland. But, nothing daunted, the old lady rambled on, setting forth all the advantages the place would offer in the present contingency, should their hopes be fulfilled, and bringing proofs that it was exactly suited to her daughter's tastes, although, as a matter of fact, Elisa had been anything but favourably impressed with Valsolda. She finally brought her incoherent ramblings to a close by begging her son-in-law to prepare a room for her also, but not one overlooking the lake, because in Venice—so she told him—the trembling of the water always made her head dizzy.

While this strange discourse was in course of delivery Piero's mind had wandered to other matters, and instead of replying to the poor old lady, he now proceeded to question her.

"Listen, mamma," said he. "There is plenty of time to think of all this later on. At present I wish to ask you about something that happened long ago. When you were first married did you ever hear anything in Casa Scremin about a great lawsuit that the Maironis had won against the Ospedale Maggiore at Milan?"

"I?" said the old lady.

"Yes, you. Pray try and remember."

She thought a moment, and presently replied:

"I know nothing about it."

Hardly had she answered, however, when she remembered having heard her father-in-law Scremin speak of the Maironi's ill-gotten wealth, saying they had wrested it from a charitable institution.

"Wait," said she. "Perhaps . . ."

But it suddenly struck her that she might be acting imprudently, and she hastened to add: "No, I know nothing about it."

But Piero was sure she did know something.

"I have found a letter here from Avvocato Marchiaro," said he.

"Does he know?"

He certainly did not.

"Avvocato Marchiaro," Piero went on, "tells me he has negotiated a very large loan for papa with Carlo Dessalle, but that matters are now at a standstill, and he asks me to give my signature for the furtherance of the transaction. Even were I disposed to do so, I am not at liberty to give my signature at the present moment, for I have recently made some important discoveries relating to my property, which forbid my disposing of it, at least for the time being. I beg you to inform papa of this."

The poor woman's heart sank. A loan from the Dessalles! Ah, Zaneto, Zaneto! She could find nothing to say, and rose, frowning and distressed. Besides the greater grief there was her sorrow at not being able to defend her husband with her usual clever excuses and charitable interpretations, and at being obliged to accept this defeat in Piero's presence and at his hands. She left the room, he following respectfully as far as the threshold of her own apartments, where she dismissed him, saying sharply, without turning her head:

"I shall not tell him anything! Indeed I shall not!"

* * * * *

Piero returned to his letters. He had already found

Don Giuseppe Flores' visiting-card, and now he discovered a letter from him as well. He looked at it for some minutes, overwhelmed, as he had been that day in the cathedral, by the uprising of many pictures and memories of his confession to the old priest, in that little room in the lonely villa, and by a humiliating sense of the opinion this man must have of him. But to-day, nevertheless, his sensations were not the same. The meeting with Don Giuseppe in the cathedral had not been welcome to him; but, although he was indeed troubled at sight of his handwriting, still the sense of uneasiness it produced was not devoid of an element of longing and of another and peculiar emotion, for Don Giuseppe had always evoked in him the images of his parents, and now they were being brought before him in a still more familiar and living guise, and were speaking words of love and authority to his soul. Slowly he opened the letter, and read as follows:

"Dear Sir and dear Friend,—

"I came to you at the silent prayer of a poor soul, whom the Lord created august and, I may say, sacred, endowing her with admirable gifts of suffering and of submission to grief. She did not venture to openly entrust to this useless and feeble old priest a precious message laden with a wisdom that is not of man. Other hands there are more fit to bear it than these of mine, but I gathered it unwittingly from the person I have named, and now I praise Him who did not permit me to utter it to you with my faltering voice and broken words. I have determined not to repeat my visit, but to send the precious message to where they tell me you now are, to send it not in words, but inclosed in an imaginary jar, whose seal you will have no difficulty in breaking if you follow me carefully.

"Think, first of all, of the painful confession you made to me, seeking me out in my solitude at a moment when your conscience was tormenting you—a confession you pronounced with such perfect frankness, such generous ardour, that your words of reverence for me humbled me before my God. Then think of a poor despairing soul, who is not far from you: of a mother's heart that is wrung more cruelly than the world sees or believes, more cruelly than it will ever believe. Think of her now, although you may at times have forgotten her, and this not entirely unintentionally. Think how alone she is, alas! in her immense grief, and remember that there are cruel lips ever ready to whisper cruel words to her, to tell her of bitter insult offered to her belovèd and unhappy child. And then, if you reflect that the silent prayer has come to me from her, you will need no further aid in opening the jar and reading the hidden message.

"Standing as I do on the verge of the grave, it is with a thrill of terror and of hope that I feel the approach of dear and holy souls who have preceded me, and who are now coming to meet me. This morning at the altar I prayed that Divine Mercy would grant that I might soon depart in my turn, bearing with me a sweet message for two of those souls that rest in the Lord, for two souls who, when on their earthly journey, sanctified for you, my dear friend, a house standing between two lofty cypresses on the shore of a lonely lake, and near a poor little church, which even I can never forget.

"Your affectionate,

"DON GIUSEPPE FLORES."

It was indeed a touching letter, and contained a fund of gentle comfort which its writer had not suspected. Was not Piero already disposed to draw away from Jeanne? Was he not already preparing for an important act of justice, the sacrifice of that wealth his parents had never touched; and was not this the act of a worthy son, was it not a message of joy that might well be carried to those two souls resting in God? True, this to his father would have seemed insufficient; perhaps to his mother also. And it would certainly not satisfy the venerable Don Giuseppe! Ah, well! If only he had never known any Catholics of a different stamp! If only he had not been surrounded from infancy by so much Catholic meanness, both intellectual and moral! How could he help feeling that his father, Don Giuseppe, and a few more lofty spirits—if, indeed, the Catholic Church contained any more such—could not really be termed Catholics; that theirs was a different religion, a religion superior to narrow Catholicism, which shrinks from reason and is a slave in all things to a despotic and deified authority, so harsh to all who stand outside the pale, so shackled with worldly interests, so antiquated in spirit as well as in language? Once, at Villa Diedo, he had talked of religion with a certain French writer of genius who professed to be a Catholic, but whose conception of Catholic dogma was so broad that Piero had exclaimed: "But you are not a Catholic!" The man had answered: "No, I am not a Catholic in the generally accepted sense of the word." Don Giuseppe Flores was extremely prudent, but it was evident that he did not interpret Catholicism as did Záupa and his fellow-councillors, nor as did the temporalists of the Vatican, nor even according to official theology. Then why do not such men as he, such men as the Frenchman, raise their voices? Why do they not lead their brothers back to truth? Why do they not endeavour to reform their Church? Why do they not rise, if necessary, against the despots, at least against such as are anonymous? Piero had said as much to the Frenchman, and the answer had been: "Only saints could do that." And why are they not all saints? Why do they not become saints? Is it then so difficult to sacrifice one's possessions, one's pleasures?

A wave of pride swept over him, as he reflected that this was precisely what he himself was about to do, although he was neither a saint nor bound, after all, to any Church, to any official creed.

III

Much later on the same evening, he wrote to his legal adviser asking for an appointment. It was a sultry night, and the house was suffocatingly hot. Piero felt that, owing both to the heat and to his agitation, he would not be able to sleep if he went to bed. He therefore determined to carry the note to the post-office himself. But first he took from his valise, and reread for the hundredth time, the document he had found in the portfolio, and which had been the cause of his writing to his lawyer. It was a letter in his mother's hand, which she had begun on the nineteenth of January, 1862, nine days before her death and had left unfinished, and in which she entrusted a dear friend with the care of informing her son, in case she herself should die during his infancy, that, according to information received from his poor father, the Maironi wealth had been derived from a lawsuit unjustly won against the Ospitale Maggiore at Milan. The last words of the unfinished letter were: "I hope . . ." She had surely hoped that her son would possess a proud and strong spirit, and it was her son who would confer with Avvocato X on the morrow, and who would commission him to search among the archives of the Ospitale Maggiore for information concerning this quarrel with the Maironi family. He also intended to ask the lawyer for an opinion as to what the verdict would probably be in case of an appeal. He was silent concerning the steps he proposed taking should the verdict be in favour of the hospital, nor did he intend to discuss this point with the lawyer. The sky was threatening, and his steps re-echoed through the deserted streets, but dimly illumined by the few lamps that burn all night. From the post he strolled slowly towards Piazza Maggiore moved by a vague desire—now that the die was cast—to muse upon the future there in the darkness of the night, in the presence of those mighty clouds, amidst the solemn silence of the sleeping houses, where he felt more alone than in his own room. He felt that his destiny was about to be unrolled before him, that a great change was about to take place within him, that his old presentiment was about to be fulfilled, and that the time was come when the path which the Great Unknown had destined him to tread would be pointed out to him. His heart swelled and throbbed violently; throbbed in eager anticipation of this voluntary passage from wealth to poverty, of the hard struggle for existence which was one with the struggle for the idea. A subtly pleasant sense of pride held all the chords of will and of energy at tension. He paused and clenched his fists; he could have sworn that his eyes glistened, and it was at this moment that he became conscious of an essential deficiency in Jeanne the lover, for, loving as she did, with the spirit rather than with the senses, she had, nevertheless, been unable to become one with him either in the highest reaches or the lowest depths of his soul. The flames of pride and of intellectual frenzy had, for the time, absorbed all the heat of his lower life. He looked with haughty contempt upon the danger of falling into basest sensuality should he leave Jeanne; he believed he was now for ever safe from those fevers. He did indeed recall the fallacious sense of security his loathing for the sins of sensuality had given him, in hours of mysticism; but why should not these vicissitudes of passion finally cease, and who could say they had not already ceased?

He banished that memory, and entered the deserted Piazza Maggiore opposite the spectral magnificence of the great, black loggias with their staring eyes, with which a glorious master of olden days has surrounded the decaying and blind creation of a still more ancient colleague, as some humanists have surrounded mediaeval ideas with dazzling splendour. He reflected that it might soon be his lot to leave for ever this city whose tutelary genius resides in those marvellous loggias and in the delicate and lofty tower that rises beside them, forming, as Carlino Dessalle once said, an exclamation-point set after their beauty. The memories of five and twenty years rose before him, as do all the events of his life before a dying man. As in a lightning flash he saw once more many places in the city which were connected with indelible memories: the courtyard of Casa Scremin, where, as a boy, he had played with the son of the original Giacomo; the café, whither, in those bygone days, they had been wont to escort him on Sundays, that he might feast on ices; the country walks which Don Paolo had loved, the churches they had visited together; the Seminary, where, in compliance with Don Paolo's wish, he had several times undergone examinations in Latin and Greek, and always to his intense anguish; the rooms in which the happiest, the most painful and the most barren moments of his life had been passed; the offices of the Town Hall; the hall where the Council met; and, finally, Villa Diedo!

Villa Diedo! And Vena di Fonte Alta? And his promise? He would go there for a few hours only, and postpone his visit as long as possible, waiting at least a fortnight or three weeks, which would make it the middle of July. It would perhaps be wiser not to go at all, and thus loosen the tie still more, but he had promised. It should be nothing more than a short call, a simple greeting. Yes, a short call, a simple greeting; but the thought of this call, of this greeting, which might, perhaps, be the last, sufficed to deprive him of all desire to continue his musings.

IV

Fancy the monstrous, horned, great-grandfather of all elephants barring the broad way, his head bowed, his flat skull stretched forward into the sunshine and supporting the weight of an enormous pyramid, his swelling flanks fading into the shadow beyond. Thus' between two narrow valleys, hewn out by the strokes of a god, does the spur that bears Vena di Fonte Alta stretch forward from the base of Picco Astore, its twin horns facing the great stone quarry of Villascura. Towering above the abyss that encircles them, the pine forests and beech groves of Vena wave against a background of sky, spotted here and there with pale emerald, where the fields press them asunder and overflow, and dotted with red and white where small houses are huddled together in groups. He who contemplates them from the top of the sloping and soaring Picco Astore, or of the lofty, cloud-capped mountains of Val di Rovese and of Val Posina, may not realize their delicate and exquisite poetry. But the wayfarer who threads their winding depths asks himself if, when the world was young, this was not the scene of the short loves of sad spirits of the hills and of gay spirits of the air ; if the earth, in obedience to their varying moods, did not transform itself around them again and again, now forming shady marriage-beds or leafy couches for reposeful contemplation, now surrounding them with scenes of melancholy or of mirth, of great thought or of merry jest ; which changes ceasing when the lovers suddenly vanished, the earth retained for evermore the form it had last assumed. Every object bears the impress of a sentiment, of a personal idea of beauty, which moves us to sigh with a sad, indefinable sense of the absence of some one who must once have passed this way, and whom we should have loved. The scene of amorous overtures—a tiny field spread with grassy velvet, and wedged into the very heart of a grove of beeches, between two curving wings of rock-strewn soil, where great pines once towered—is followed by a sloping maze of thick and twisted branches, beneath which mossy couches lie hidden in the pale green shadow, which, in tone, is like the motionless waters of a lake in a distant valley. The path that follows the naked shoulder of a hill in search of the pasture-lands in far away hollows, of distant watches of pointed pines drawn up in line along the dizzy summit of this paradise, slips down from these heights towards the rim of a great, empty cup, sunk in the bosom of the fields as if moulded by the whirling of a mighty turbine, at the bottom of which some love to lie and contemplate the encircling and overhanging crater, the drooping ferns, the clustering hellebore, the cyclamen, and far up above, in the white disk of sky, the eternal sailing of the clouds. In the wandering breezes the wayfarer hears, from time to time, the different voices of the different trees; the humble and the proud, the tender and the stern. He sees seats of white stone scattered about the woods, isolated seats for solitary ponderers, seats in groups for large assemblies, upon which are engraved hieroglyphics more incomprehensible even than the language of the trees, and which were, perhaps, the work of ancient members of these assemblies, notes of bird-music fixed upon the stone, or records left for future generations by those long since passed away. But above the shining green of the beeches, above the hollows embosoming the pasture-lands, above the bare shoulders of the hills, the dominating thought of the poem is revealed at every step: the sloping, soaring Picco Astore; while round about his lofty and melancholy nakedness the great cloud-capped mountains of Val di Rovese and of Val Posina sit, like Job's comforters, enwrapped in cloaks of mist, and looming in the distance whenever the path crosses some prominent ridge. It is in a wild ravine of Astore that the several springs of the Acqua Barbarena, the Fonte Alta, are born, and flow weeping in search of one another, forming, at last, a joyous union in the rocky bed along which they course for a time, only to separate again, and ripple away with gentle complaining, to the scattered hamlets of Vena and to the garden of a certain lady who, between the lecture and the ball at Villa Diedo, had been informed by Jeanne of her intended visit, receiving the news with pious misgivings, and dreading the corrupting effects of worldliness upon her Alpine solitude, should Maironi follow Jeanne.

Near the church, on the edge of Val di Rovese, there stands a small hotel which was certainly not built by the spirits either of the mountains or of the air. The lower floor is nothing more than a rustic tavern, where, on Sundays, the wine is wont to ferment and overflow in song and rioting. The creaking wooden stairs, the rooms above with their floors of deal, and their deal partitions, form a homely interior in which one is glad to feel oneself alive, all the more, perhaps, because of the funereal suggestions of the all-pervading odour of pine-wood. During the Summer modest clients from the plains assemble here, some with pale, anæmic faces or impaired digestions, others—the artists and poets—with exceeding light purses. One of these poets, having fallen in love with Vena, with the Acqua Barbarena and with Picco Astore, comes here every year, and has bestowed a name upon every rock, every clod of these highlands, names which no map sets forth, but which, nevertheless, have found favour. This fact may explain the amazement of a certain fiscal engineer who came to Hotel Astore to see Carlino when the Dessalles had been there about two weeks, and who was informed by the maid that Signor Dessalle was not in the house, but that he would probably find him in the *Wild Boar's Lair!*

The Wild Boar's Lair is hidden away among the intricacies of a wooded slope at a short distance from the hotel and from the Villino dei Faggi, which Signora Cerri, the confidante of the spotless Maestro Bragozzo, had been occupying with her family for the last twelve days. Between an open strip of steep grass-land and a deep gorge—the *Witches' Caldron*—where, uprising above a thicket of low shrubs, tall fir trees soar in all their glory towards the clouds, three boulders jut out from the sloping bank like the fleshless chins of three monstrous old men. In the middle boulder the fanciful poet imagined he could trace a likeness to a wild boar's snout. To right and left hang the two ends of the brief semicircle of beeches that forms the Lair. Two young firs flank the narrow opening, while the trunks of two more outline a small window that looks out across the green slip of grass-land at a solid wall of low and stunted beeches in full leaf.

Within the Lair's ever shifting shade through which the sun was glinting, there sat talking Carlino Dessalle, Signora Cerri, Maestro Bragozzo, who was the Cerris' guest, Bassanelli, who had escaped from the cares of government for a couple of days, the whimsical poet and the notary of Vena, a learned man, slow both of step and of speech. Signora Cerri's five children were playing noisily in the Witches' Caldron.

Suddenly Jeanne and Maironi appeared at the entrance to the Lair. Signora Cerri crimsoned. She had not been warned of Maironi's presence at Vena.

She had had great hopes he would not come, and had been watching Jeanne carefully. Jeanne went to Mass at the parish church every Sunday and conducted herself with perfect propriety. She visited Signora Cerri almost every day, exhibiting a liking for her that amounted almost to affection; she had sought in many ways to gain her confidence, had made friends with the children, and was always ready to discuss farming and politics with their father. In a word, she was evidently delighted with these surroundings that were so new to her. Simple, but plainly indicating easy circumstances, merry within the carefully guarded limits of morality and Catholic orthodoxy, these surroundings were at once Christian and modern. The young matron had no idea of the power she wielded over Jeanne's soul through her own great and shining purity, the gentleness of her nature, and her religiosity which influenced her every act, but which was devoid of all ascetic and moral narrowness. She was much gratified and somewhat surprised by the seriousness, the good intentions, the lofty sentiments she was continually discovering in Jeanne. In her own rectitude and inexperience of human vicissitudes it seemed to her impossible that a person bound by a sinful tie could display so much goodness, and she imagined that her friend had repented, that the tie was already severed. It was therefore difficult for her to hide her painful agitation when Jeanne appeared followed by Maironi.

In Jeanne's eyes there shone that indescribable light that her lover's presence always kindled in them. Maironi was in no mood to listen to or take part in the general conversation, and having exchanged a few words with his friends, he left the Lair and strolled towards the Witches' Caldron. Jeanne overtook him almost immediately.

"Let us resume our discussion," said she softly, and she moved slowly forward, thus tacitly inviting him to follow. "If we should all seek out the origin of our wealth, don't you fancy we should all find that some part of it at least was ill-gotten? Besides, after all, justice is simply a matter of opinion! Pardon me, but is there not a good deal of sentimentality in all this? You yourself could do so much more good with your money than the Ospitale Maggiore at Milan."

Instead of answering Piero asked hotly: "How can you say that justice is simply a matter of opinion?"

"Of course it is!" she retorted, herself displaying some heat. "And this case is a proof of the truth of what I say! You believe it is right for you to give up your possessions, although this act is in direct opposition to a sentence given by competent judges, while I feel that it is unjust to usurp the judges' office. Here are three different ideas of justice—yours, mine and the judges'."

Hardly had she uttered the words when she repented as usual, and begged for forgiveness humbly and with despairing tenderness.

"I cannot think of you as poor," said she. "I cannot bear to think you will be deprived of the comforts to which you are accustomed. I myself would gladly live in poverty in one of these huts here if only you were not deprived of the fullness of life, and of the means of obeying the generous impulses of your heart and mind!"

Then she begged him to tell her exactly what the lawyer had said. Piero answered coldly in a tone that betrayed his disinclination to continue the discussion. The lawyer was of opinion that if the Ospitale Maggiore had lost the suit against the Maironis, it had been simply in consequence of a slight mistake in the wording of the will of a certain Marchese Reyna, a cousin of Alessandro Maironi, Piero's great-grandfather.

"No socialist," she said softly, "would do what you propose; and, as a socialist. . . ."

She did not dare finish the sentence and say that a socialist, as such, would be justified in not acting according to the dictates of a pious reverence for the idea of property, or for the right to bequeath; that he would indeed be justified in not favouring charitable institutions which, by relieving the misery produced by an unjust economic system, help to keep that system alive.

"I am not a socialist like the others," Piero said. "I have no intention of applying certain theories to my own advantage."

Near the bottom of the little ravine that runs from north to south between the Wild Boar's Lair and the church, Jeanne paused on the edge of a short but very steep slope and said: "Please give me your hand."

She seized the hand that was stretched out to her, and pressed it, smiling. Then she stepped down, whispering: "How strong you are!"

For the first time since Piero's arrival she used the familiar *thou*. At the bottom, when she was once more on smooth ground, she leaned forward against the dear supporting arm, enveloping the man she loved in her own warm and perfumed atmosphere. She had been so afraid he would not keep his promise, and now she was so happy in his presence, so full of hope!

Opposite them, on the lofty summit of the slope, the hotel loomed white through the fir trees. Piero, pale and silent, had already turned in that direction. "No!" she cried, in the tone and with the pout of a fretful child, and motioned with her hand towards the path that leads southwards along the ravine. "Bassanelli is at the hotel, and there are many others besides. I want you to tell me what you will do when you have relinquished all your property." And she could not repress a shudder at the thought of this folly.

"Very well," said Piero, determined to make this conversation decisive. "Let us go on then. Have you no umbrella?"

A veil had fallen upon the emerald of the fields; the shadows of the trees had vanished in the diffused light of the sun that was concealed; the dense fog that had come smoking up from the valleys was invading all the upper hollows of Vena and the tops of the forests, deadening the sound of the scattered cow-bells in the pastures, enveloping and darkening the slopes of Picco Astore. It seemed to Jeanne that a damp white cloak was descending upon the soft fields, was enwrapping Piero and herself in its woolly folds, was cutting them off from the world of human anxieties, from the past and from the present, and filling them with a sweet sense that they were souls of another planet. She realized that an hour of supreme importance was approaching, that there hung in the balance not only her own fate and happiness—what did they matter, after all?—but the happiness also of the man she loved, the man who was being led astray by fatal dreams. Timidly she passed her hand through his arm, whispering: "Do you mind?" And although his "No" had a cold ring, she pressed her lovely form tightly to his side. "Dearest!" she murmured.

At that very moment Piero was saying to himself: "How hard it is for her to understand!" Her firm opposition to his ideas, her tenacious scepticism, her cold reasoning which was hostile to his generous impulses—the justice of this reasoning he was often forced to admit, although he did so most unwillingly—and, above all, the fact that she had no word of admiration for the sacrifice he was about to make, were gradually loosening the tie that bound him to her. Now he was half angry with her, and impatient of her loving words and caresses.

"In the first place," he said, *ex abrupto*, and with the intention of putting a stop to her tenderness, "I am not going to relinquish all my possessions. I shall keep a small estate of the Maironis' which did not come to them with the Reyna property, and the house at Oria which my mother inherited from her uncle Ribera. I shall be poor, but not in want. As soon as the transfer has been made I shall go to France for study, and perhaps, also, go in for some manual labour. That will be the first step towards living up to *my opinion* of justice, towards becoming in all things the man my mother's great and peerless soul would have wished me to become. Henceforth my earnest endeavour shall be to incarnate my mother's ideal. She would rejoice to see me detach myself from a social class whose members refuse to admit eternal justice because they fear the sacrifices it may enjoin upon them, or who make of justice a god of their own creating, with whom it is less difficult to balance accounts; a class of which the one great aim is enjoyment, enjoyment day after day, which aspires only to . . ."

He did not finish the sentence. At the first harsh words Jeanne had dropped his arm; at the last, feeling that she was about to faint, her face deathly pale, her eyes half closed, she stretched out a trembling, groping hand seeking for his support that she might not fall. Terrified, he threw his arm about her waist, and glanced eagerly around, but there was no one to be seen. The fog was thicker than ever. He stood supporting her, and his breath came hard as he encouraged and reproached her in turn. She tried to push his arm away, murmuring incoherently: "No, no! Leave me . . . I am not worthy . . . not worthy . . . !" Still clasping her waist, Piero started slowly towards the hotel. Poor Jeanne had a horror of the hotel. "No, no!" she murmured. Piero entreated her to rest on the grass for a few minutes. "No, no! Take me to the fountain, to the fountain!" she moaned. She seemed to be regaining her strength; her voice was stronger and more firm. Piero was unacquainted with the whereabouts of this fountain, and Jeanne was not able to direct him.

She tried to walk and lead him there. This was easier for her than talking, and she started forward, leaning on his arm, staggering, panting, stopping to rest at every step. She would have liked to speak, but could not, and could only fix upon his face a look expressing all the pain her helplessness was causing her, a look he would never forget. Then, when her terrible exhaustion forced her to pause, she smiled upon him with infinite sadness. Once she thought she heard voices coming towards them through the fog, and in her dismay made a desperate effort to drag herself from the path. However, the voices faded away. "Will you wait a moment?" she gasped, exhausted by her fright and the effort she had made. They passed a group of huts, and then turned to the right into a little hollow shaded by walnut-trees, where several paths meet, and one of the trickling springs of Acqua Barbarena calls out in a weak, complaining voice, as it falls into the basin placed there for the thirsty cattle. Piero persuaded Jeanne to rest on the edge of this basin. He had no cup, but caught some of the spring water in his hands. She drank, and then pressed her lips to the joined palms, sobbing, with dry eyes, and shook her head without raising it when he asked if she would drink again. Then slowly, very slowly, he drew his hands apart, and in doing so touched her face lightly, with a gesture full of pity. She quickly hid her face, and seeking for her handkerchief held it out to him, still covering her eyes with one hand, and begged him to dip it in the water. When she had bathed her eyes she sat still and silent with bowed head, her hands lying clasped in her lap. He was casting about for a word of comfort to speak to her, and kept repeating in a voice that was full of remorse, that he had never intended to cause her so much pain.

"Will you let me follow you?" Jeanne murmured. "Will you let me follow wherever you may lead, without ever appearing before you?"

He did not answer, and once more she questioned him with the smouldering fire of her great dry eyes.

"Jeanne! How can you think of such a thing if you disapprove of what I am going to do?"

She would have thrown herself at his feet had not Piero prevented her doing so by force. She grasped his wrists and clung to them, talking to him with laboured breath, her face straining towards him, her gaze fixed upon him with an expression like that of one who, at the point of death, seeks for hope in the doctor's eyes.

"No, no! My God, no! You do not understand! You do not understand! There are fatally dark places in my mind, and sometimes when I contradict you, I am moved by a sort of evil spirit that seizes me, that makes me speak words to my own undoing! But I admire you so much in what you are about to do! Indeed, indeed I do! I have the profoundest respect for your faith in an ideal which I wish I could share, but, alas! I cannot. I feel how splendid your determination is, how grand it is! I would give all I possess if it could help you in your studies, if it would help to bring about the triumph of your ideas, the triumph of what you call absolute justice. There is no sacrifice I would not make! I do not deserve all those terrible things you have just been saying, indeed I do not deserve them! I do not love riches and enjoyments, I do not cling to the surroundings in which I have always lived—Signora Cerri can vouch for that—I do not love dress save for your sake; for even when you do not see me I always try to fancy you are present. If you will but say the word I am ready to give up everything! I will give my brother all I possess and come and serve you, if I may. If not, I will remain near you and work for my living, and then perhaps some day you may pity me!"

She paused, and dropped Piero's hands; her beautiful, eloquent eyes were veiled with tears. Maironi felt the presence of a soul he had never known before, whose mighty love gave it strength to withstand its own deep and morbid scepticism, while the white light of purity flashed forth from the very heart of the clouds that enveloped it.

"At first," Jeanne resumed, "the idea of leaving my brother could never have occurred to me. The disharmony between us has made you love me less, while my love for you has been ever increasing because I never wished you to become as I am, but longed myself to become like you!"

She was silent, and presently raised her tearful eyes in anticipation of an answer. Piero's gaze was fixed upon the slow curling of the fog among the leaves of the walnut-trees that were heavy with moisture. In the sadness of all that surrounded them there seemed to be a consciousness of their painful silence.

"Oh, God! Oh, God!" moaned Jeanne softly. "To-day," she added after another pause, "if this water were poison I should not ask you whether I should drink of it." Piero looked at her in amazement, but hardly had she said, sadly and as if speaking to herself: "He does not even remember!" when he recalled Praglia and the glass of water.

"Yes," said he, greatly moved. "I do remember. Not even to-day would I tell you to drink."

"Perhaps not," she sighed, "because you pity me."

"Oh, no! Not from pity!"

Jeanne thrilled with hope, but presently repeated sadly: "Yes, yes! It is only pity!"

Burning words seemed to rise to his lips, but he only said: "Do not speak thus!"

Jeanne raised herself upon her elbow, and, with her forefinger, traced upon the water the word—Pity.

Speaking with greater composure, her glance fixed on the surface of the water that was once more smooth and unbroken, she said:

"You have lost the poetry of love! You will fall into the old temptations again; you will seek love, and you will buy it."

"I have not lost the poetry of love!"

Another eternal silence followed.

Piero looked at his watch and observed softly that it was almost half-past three. He had ordered the carriage to be ready at four, for he wished to take the six o'clock train at Villascura. Jeanne, who had not been aware of this, started nervously, but immediately controlled herself. She did not move, however, and as he seemed to be waiting, said:

"You go. I shall remain here."

Her composure aroused a suspicion in him. He had heard there were precipices not far distant, and his heart was full of vague apprehensions. He pressed Jeanne to rise and accompany him to the hotel, but she would not, and continued to repeat: "Go, go!"

"But I cannot leave you like this!" he said, and added tenderly: "Come, dear, come! Perhaps some day . . ."

"Perhaps some day?" she cried, her face shining with love and joy.

"Perhaps some day there may exist between us such harmony of soul as to justify a close union."

Was he uttering his own innermost thoughts, or had his vague fears led him to speak thus? Once more Jeanne's face fell, and shaking her head incredulously, she murmured:

"Pity!"

He cast a rapid glance around, then bent over her, and pressing his lips upon her hair, whispered:

"No, dear! Hope!"

She threw back her head to hold the kiss as long as possible, while a fleeting light of joy suffused her face.

"If that is true, if you do really hope," she said, "you will remain until to-morrow. If not, I shall believe it is untrue!"

He had felt the touch of that soft, fragrant, silky hair; he heard the gentle offer, and his heart stood still. In a voice that trembled he answered:

"I will remain."

Jeanne rose with a deep, deep sigh, breathed a "Thank you," and gazed at Piero as a happy mother sometimes looks at her baby, with a tender, joyous and childish expression; in former days he had liked to have her look at him thus. He liked it still! She gave a little, short, soft laugh, a laugh that was unconsciously voluptuous, and that seemed to say: "I see that flame in your eyes which was once so unwelcome to me; now you will kiss me again, I know you will, but not upon the hair!" And slowly, very slowly, the young man's face did indeed approach hers, which was composing itself slowly, very slowly, and was lifting itself gravely towards the meeting.

Then their two souls that had risen to their lips uttered a thing so wonderful that when their lips parted at last, their eyes could not bear each other's gaze. It was not the first time Piero and Jeanne had met in that unspoken thought, but they had always met with hostility. Now it was no longer so. Now the woman knew that there was one repugnant way of binding her lover for ever; the man knew that there was one sweet way of riveting his chains for ever, and he saw that her resistance was shaken. Both, at once attracted and repulsed, trembled with emotion.

Meanwhile an unpleasant wind had sprung up and was blowing the fog into their faces. The herds were on their way down to the drinking trough, and their bells sounded near at hand. Jeanne and Piero started towards Rio Freddo, the goal of the first short walk all newcomers take at Vena, she leading the way in silence, conscious of his eyes fixed upon her, and turning her head to smile at him when that gaze became so piercing she could not bear it. Little by little the fog lifted, and on the left there loomed, black and towering, the tragic Picco Astore, while in the pale sunshine there appeared sloping hollows, ridges covered with soft pastures, gloomy heights crowded with fir trees, and the grand profiles of the mountains of Val Posina. Presently the sunshine burst forth on all sides and surrounded the two silent figures; the drops on the wet grass glistened, the emerald of the pastures grew more vivid, the bald summits of Picco Astore were red and glowing, and the damp odours of the hills were strong and aromatic. Jeanne sat down upon a low, ruinous wall which cuts across the path at the point where it leaves the fields and enters a wooded space. Pale, and exhausted by the last steep ascent, she could not speak, but she smiled as she looked into Piero's face. Near them was a thicket of young beeches mixed with firs. Jeanne glanced at it and sighed: "How delightful to live here together for ever, and forget the world beneath us! What joy! What joy!" She waited a moment in vain for a word from him, and finally murmured, her eyes still downcast: "Have you nothing to say?"

Piero did not answer. He did not even appear to hear her, but seemed to be studying his own shadow upon the grass. She arose, allowed him to help her over the wall, and started resolutely forward through the woods, he following close behind. They had advanced a short distance beneath the tangled branches, over great flat stones hidden in the moss, and intersected by the roots of the firs and rhododendrons, when suddenly there yawned before them to right and left the horrible *Profondo*, the *Depths*, that monstrous belt of rock curving and receding beneath the fir-crowned crests, like a colossal wave, that breaks and is flung backwards. Here before them lay Rio Freddo, the awe-inspiring boundary of the green paradise of Vena, the "Valley of the Shadow of Death." Jeanne placed her foot upon a rock that jutted out above the abyss. Piero quickly threw his arm about her waist, and, closing her eyes, she let herself sink backwards against his breast. He strained her to him, and, still in silence, lavished such violent caresses upon her that she was terrified, and cried in a pleading voice: "No, no, no!"

Then suddenly, and after a struggle with himself, the young man desisted. She slipped from his arms and climbed the low wall, springing from the woods into the open field.

Some one was coming towards her up the hill, and while still at some distance inquired if she had seen the *Signor Conte*. It was the coachman whom Piero had kept waiting so long. Did the Signor Conte intend to leave or not? He, the coachman, must go back at any rate. Piero tried in vain to persuade him to wait until the morrow, but finally, having settled with him, dismissed him. Maironi turned to Jeanne.

"Should I have left to-night?" said he.

Her eyes fell, and she did not answer.

In silence they went down the hill, she serious, he sad. When they once more passed the fountain beneath the walnut trees, she gave him a swift glance that said: "It was here it all began!" After that she did not look at him again. Upon reaching the spot where the path turns to the left towards the Wild Boar's Lair, she hesitated a moment, but finally took the one that mounts to the Villino dei Faggi, and leads thence to the hotel. Not a single word did they speak until they had nearly reached the villa. Then Piero asked his companion if she were really angry with him. "I do not know," said she, and glanced tenderly at him, fearing to have offended him. She saw he was much troubled, and anxiously hastened to reassure him. "No, no, dear! I am not angry! I love you too much to be angry!"

There was music going on at the villa, and Jeanne paused at the gate to listen. It was a composition for violin and piano. The bow, held by a powerful hand, was making the instrument discourse in mighty language which, alternating with delicate twitterings and whisperings, seemed to Jeanne to contain both reproof and exhortation. It suddenly struck her that if Signora Cerri only knew, she would talk thus to her, and that if it had been her—Jeanne's—fate to draw in religious faith and moral rectitude with her mother's milk as Signora Cerri had done, she would not have deserved, or rather, would not be about to deserve such reproof. The children who were playing in the garden caught sight of her, and ran towards her clapping their hands, and begging her to come in. Ah, she could not enter that house at such a moment! She motioned to them to be quiet, and started onward with Piero, just as the violin once more burst into burning discourse which now seemed what the composer, old

Tartini, had probably meant it to seem, a bitter shout of fiendish triumph.

V

That evening the guests at Hotel Astore retired early. Carlino was vexed at his sister's disappearance with Piero from the Wild Boar's Lair; he was vexed that she should have gone as far as Rio Freddo in such a fog, and with neither cloak nor shawl; he was vexed that she had not taken her *Kephir* with him at the accustomed hour; *Kephir*, that powerful Oriental remedy, that was to make a Hercules of him and a Juno of her; he was especially vexed that, in speaking with him, Bassanelli should have dared to allude to his sister's imprudence. Deep gloom hung over Bassanelli himself, who had come to Vena with the firm belief that he should find Jeanne but not Maironi. After their return to the hotel, Jeanne had not been able to remain alone with Piero a moment before dinner. She had therefore whispered hurriedly to him, pressing his hand passionately, almost surreptitiously: "You will not leave to-morrow, will you?" He had not had time to answer, or perhaps the tumult of his soul deprived him of words. After dinner, in the little drawing-room where the Dessalles received, and dispensed tea of an evening, the conversation had been desultory and not altogether agreeable. Bassanelli had introduced the subject of the Brescia elections, where the Government had triumphed, thanks to the activity of the ministerial candidate, and to him alone. It was plain enough that he intended to allude to Maironi, whose blood began to boil. Certain vague phrases which Bassanelli presently let fall appeared to him to point at other help that had been vainly solicited by that poor creature, Marchese Zaneto, who certainly was not to blame because he possessed weaknesses common to so many. Then Piero, who could no longer contain himself, demanded that Bassanelli speak plainly, and denied his right to judge private actions, the reasons for which he could not possibly be acquainted with. Bassanelli retorted sharply. Who had said his word had been meant for Piero? Carlino, seeing that his sister was becoming indignant, and that it was with difficulty she refrained from siding openly and warmly with Maironi, hastened to put an end to the discussion.

"Enough!" said he. "It is time for tea."

While the tea was being disposed of only a few cold remarks were exchanged, and then all withdrew to their rooms.

VI

Piero's room opened upon the broad, central corridor of the hotel, and was opposite Jeanne's. Bassanelli occupied the adjoining room, a thin wooden partition separating the two. Hardly had Piero left the Dessalles' drawing-room when the jealous Bassanelli also took his leave, for he was anxious to ascertain where his rival slept, and did not wish to ask him or any one else openly. He was detained a moment on the narrow stairway by a maid-servant who was coming down, and therefore failed to see which room Maironi entered. Pretending not to recognize his own door, he looked into several rooms before finding the right one, whereupon he mumbled an apology, and noisily entered his own apartment. The repeated disappearances of Jeanne and Piero during the day, a strange light of feverish excitement in their eyes at dinner, certain glances they had exchanged, certain moments of abstraction he had noticed in both, had aroused a bitter suspicion in the breast of this cunning old expert in nocturnal adventures. He was determined to keep awake, to watch, and to prevent.

Piero flung himself into an armchair before the open window, and looked out at the stars trembling over yonder, above a black and wooded peak ; he was picturing to himself the accomplishment of the promise that had been uttered without words, that had passed from lip to lip, that he had heard there on the precipice of Rio Freddo, had felt in Jeanne's movement as she slipped from his arms ; the promise he had read in her troubled glance whenever their eyes had met, and which the pressure of her hand, that last, long, eloquent pressure, had confirmed. Perhaps what was promised was bound to be : it was, after all, simply her right which nature was relentlessly demanding. His seething blood, so full of silent impulse, subjugated his reason and made it speak thus. Meanwhile the voices of those below stairs were becoming hushed. The outer door was closed ; heavy steps sounded on the stairs and then above his head. The house was asleep at last. Piero blew out his candle. Refusing to listen to the weak reproaches of conscience, but, nevertheless, not without a sense of shame, he stretched himself on the floor to see, before setting the door ajar, if any light shone between it and the pavement, and if the petroleum lamp in the corridor was still burning. It had gone out. He rose, his heart beating violently. While making these preparations he became ever more engrossed in the thought that Jeanne also was awake; that her imagination was on fire like his own; that she, like himself, was listening with a wildly beating heart. The floor creaked slightly as he rose to his feet. He immediately heard a noise in Bassanelli's room. He listened with bated breath. Bassanelli was walking noisily back and forth between the door and window. At last all was quiet once more. Piero waited some time, but as soon as he ventured to stir again his neighbour resumed his walk, and even opened his door and paced up and down the corridor. Piero was aware of this man's passion for Jeanne, and had little doubt that his conduct was inspired by jealousy and was intended as a warning to him. He threw himself upon the bed, and although he was careful not to move, Bassanelli continued from time to time to give evidence of his wakefulness.

Between one and two o'clock Piero fell into a light and dreamy sleep. He thought she was coming to him, that she touched his door with her finger, and he sprang eagerly from the bed to let her in, and warn her that Bassanelli was on the alert. Hardly had his feet touched the floor, however, when he concluded he must have been dreaming. But just at that moment there were two sharp knocks at his door. He started, and without pausing to ask who was there, opened the door very softly. In the corridor stood the proprietor of the hotel, half dressed, a candle in one hand, a letter in the other. In his bewilderment it was some time before Piero could grasp the fact that the letter was for him, and that a driver had brought it, who was ready to go down again at once should the gentleman wish to accompany him.

Speechless, motionless and with staring eyes, Piero read the short note. The proprietor waited a moment, and then inquired what his orders were. Piero roused himself, requested him to light his candle for him, said he must consider what to do, and that meanwhile the driver was to wait. When the proprietor had left the room he read the letter a second time. It was from the Marchesa, and ran as follows:

"*Sunday*, 7 p.m.

"DEAREST PIERO,—

"The director has telegraphed to papa:—Physical condition very alarming. Mind at present perfectly lucid. Asks to see parents, husband, Don Giuseppe Flores.—We are starting at once. Don Giuseppe will join us to-night. Pray!

"MAMMA."

Piero pressed his clenched fists to his eyes so hard that his arms trembled. Presently he withdrew them and stretched them slowly aloft, his eyes fixed upon the light, his breath coming hard. Then, as if moved by a sudden impulse of his will, he hastily gathered his things together, rushed downstairs and called the driver. He charged the hotel proprietor to make his excuses to the Dessalles, and inform them that a summons from town had obliged him to leave thus suddenly. Then he jumped into the little cart that was waiting before the door.

* * * * *

Down, down into the darkness he went behind the slow-trotting, jaded horse, perched on the crazy cart, beside a mute companion. Above him the woods, the pastures with their paths, the thickets, the fountains that knew so much of his secret, and Picco Astore itself were vanishing for ever. Down, down beneath the glistening stars, now following a bare slope, now passing black groups of narrow cabins. Above him the house where Jeanne, all unconscious, lay sleeping is vanishing for ever. Down, down behind the jaded, slow-trotting horse, through a grove of sleeping beeches, the vanguard of a few firs that are awake and watching, and along the curving brinks of precipices. Down, down from right to left, from left to right, with the haunting horror of the betrayal he, in his selfishness, had been planning, while she, poor unhappy soul, was calling him to her bedside ; with the sense of a hidden power that had been slowly weaving a net about him in his blindness, and had now laid violent hold upon him ; with the ineffable bitterness of that vain word—Pray ! Down, down from the cold winds of the heights into an atmosphere that grew ever more stifling ; with the vision of his whole sad life, of his mournful goal ever before him. Down, down from left to right, from right to left, for ever and ever, behind the jaded, slow-trotting horse, perched upon the crazy cart, beside his mute companion. Down, down to the very depths, and the murmur of shady streams ; the first stage of the journey is over.

How many hours more ?

Six.

CHAPTER VII

IN LUMINE VITAE

I

HE reached the Asylum shortly after nine o'clock. The doorkeeper had orders to conduct him to the Director's study. This gentleman, having been warned of his arrival by means of the speaking-tube, came to meet him on the stairs, repeating " Well done ! Well done ! " in cordial tones, while he answered Piero's tacit question with a sigh and a gesture of doubt and discouragement. Then she was indeed in danger ? Alas, yes, she was in danger. And her mind ? Her mind was perfectly clear.

" Oh, she has asked for you so often ! " the Director added, with the gentle sympathy of the tender-hearted physician, and, at the same time, with the placid smile of the man who is accustomed to painful scenes. " She longs so for your presence, poor woman ! "

He motioned to Piero to enter his study, but Piero knew that was not the way.

" How is this ? " said he. " Am I not to go to her ? "

" Not at once, if you please," the Director replied, smiling gently. " Not at once. I have had some refreshments prepared for you in my study. Your mother-in-law it was who thought of it. What a wonderful woman she is ! What a saint ! " Piero protested that he had no desire to eat, but that he wished to see his wife at once! As the doctor still hesitated he began to suspect some mystery, to fear they were trying to hide . . .

"No, no!" the Director cried emphatically. "Nothing of the sort!" And he went on with some embarrassment, placing his hands on Piero's arms, and gazing intently into his eyes.

"Now I will explain everything. There is an old priest here, whom your wife expressly desired to see; he is most anxious to speak to you before you go to your wife's room. The Signora Marchesa wishes this also. That is all."

"Very well."

Before sending for Don Giuseppe the Director gave Piero a summary account of the illness. The patient had begun to fail in May, and had grown rapidly weaker during the last fortnight. Fever had set in on Saturday night. At the beginning of her illness the invalid had talked incessantly of a baby, of her dear baby, that had brought peace into the house. The Director apologized for his seeming indiscretion; he was simply repeating the sufferer's words. Later she had talked less often of the child, and at last not at all. Sunday morning, after a protracted silence, she had asked to see her parents, her husband and Don Giuseppe Flores. Her temperature stood at 103 at the time. "Poor little woman! She was very anxious to leave the Asylum and go to some house near by, but I did not feel justified in allowing this, on account of the fever, and for other reasons also. She alluded to the matter again this morning, but when the old priest—he is another saint, I believe!—recommended her to offer the sacrifice of her wish to God in expiation of her sins, she at once consented. Yes, yes! Indeed she would do so! She had so many sins to atone for, she said."

Piero pressed the Director's hand convulsively, and then the physician went to summon Don Giuseppe.

When he was alone the young man forced himself to give his attention to external things, that he might the more easily subdue his emotions. He went to one of the windows. It was already hot, and the locusts were singing in the blazing sun, in the immense sadness of the lonely country. When he felt more sure of himself Piero approached the door, and opened it a little way, in anticipation of Don Giuseppe's well-known step. What, what could the priest have to tell him? He listened attentively.

Silence.

Servants' voices. He drew back, and mechanically leaned over to look at a book that was lying open on the Director's desk. It was Hamlet in the original English. —the theatre scene. Once more he opened the door. Good God, those locusts! Other voices, the Director's and Don Giuseppe's at last! He began to tremble and returned to the window to compose himself. When he once more faced about the old priest, with his broad and venerable brow, his dark eyes, so solemn and gentle, stood before him, alone. Silently he spread wide his arms, Piero stretched out his own, and flung himself upon the old man's neck. Don Giuseppe was the first to free himself from this silent embrace, and placing his hands on Piero's shoulders, told him, in a low voice, that he would find the invalid in a most astonishing frame of mind. She was convinced that she must die, but was overflowing with gratitude to God, and with tenderness for her dear ones. In expressing these sentiments she exhibited great elevation of spirit ; and her reflections upon her past and present state were most acute, as were also her counsels to her parents, and her observations concerning what was said and done about her. "Oh, it is wonderful!" Don Giuseppe's voice grew softer as he spoke, his eyes dilated and brightened, and his words were accompanied by gestures that betrayed his emotion. It was quite evident that he was amazed to have found an Elisa so different from the Elisa he had known at Casa Scremin.

He seated himself upon the sofa placed there for the use of visitors, and drew Maironi down beside him. Then he passed his hand over his eyes.

"Listen," said he.

With downcast eyes, many shakes of his head, and a few disjointed words, he appeared to be inwardly debating how best to introduce what he had to say. "It is my duty to inform you of something . . ." he resumed at last, with his familiar gesture of fingers pressed to brow as if to force from it the difficult words he must speak.

Having found his way, he went on with greater ease, but with voice and face pervaded, as it were, by the emotions which the recital of these circumstances of the past was reawakening in him.

"She received the Viaticum," said he, "at five o'clock this morning, with all the sweet composure of an angel. Then, after a few moments of meditation, she begged her parents to leave her alone with me."

At this point Don Giuseppe encircled Piero's shoulders with his arm, and smiled, his eyes wet with tears. "She talked to me of you," he said. Piero hid his face in his hands.

"It would appear," Don Giuseppe resumed with a sigh, "that either the assistants or the nurses—who can tell?—hearing her rave, and never for a moment suspecting that she might understand, have talked among themselves, in her presence . . . of things which the poor girl should never have known. She heard and understood everything, and she remembers it all, and has repeated it to me. You may fancy how I strove to reassure her, to contradict these reports! But she checked me at once, saying: 'Do not say so! Do not say so! I know it is true! I can see by your eyes it is true!' She inquired if the woman were free, and was greatly distressed upon learning that she is not. She asked me if I thought you would come, and if I believed you would listen to a few words of pardon, of entreaty from her. I told her I knew you would."

Don Giuseppe paused. Piero was weeping.

"Good God, Don Giuseppe! Can you not do something to spare her this? Can you not tell her that I consider her words as already spoken, as already heard, can you not say everything that can be of any consolation to her, in my name?"

Don Giuseppe laid his hand upon Piero's knee and, without looking at him, smiled faintly once more; it was a sad smile, but different from the first. He sighed, and softly murmured a few disjointed words of doubt, words which Piero took to mean: "Is it not better, for certain reasons we must not mention, that you yourself should speak?"

There was a knock at the door. A servant announced the arrival of the Professor, who had been summoned from Bologna by telegraph.

II

It was some distance from the Director's study to the small private apartment where poor Elisa had suffered so long, and now lay dying. There were stairs to go up, and stairs to go down, long corridors to traverse, and courtyards to cross, where quiet-looking, well-dressed people were walking about, many of whom bowed respectfully to Don Giuseppe. One of these, an old gentleman of very distinguished bearing, recognized Maironi, for the Director had once introduced them, and detained him a moment.

"How is your wife? I fear she is suffering greatly, poor lady! Yes, yes, fidelity is a virtue of the feminine gender, it could not possibly be masculine! They say we are all mad here, but we know everything about everybody. There are indeed those who really do speak most imprudently! But we must have patience with them! Thank God, I am no longer in that condition, although I admit I was at one time. I see you are in the company of the Holy Ghost; I beg you both to tell the Director how rationally I speak and that it is a sin to keep me here any longer!"

The Director, who was not far distant, heard this speech, and promising the old gentleman to discharge him shortly, advised him, meanwhile, to go and have his breakfast. The unhappy man obeyed in silence, cowed, like some inferior being, by a half angry, half fearful sense of authority. The Director joined Don Giuseppe and the astonished Piero, to whom he spoke in a calm, philosophic tone of Hamlet, which he said he was then reading, praising Shakespeare's marvellous gift of divination in representing the lunacy of this most strange prince, who feigns insanity, and is all unconscious that he is indeed not only a neurasthenic, but also distinctly deficient.

Upon the short flight of steps leading to the invalid's little apartment they met Marchesa Nene, who welcomed her son-in-law with a quiet smile, and with something of determination on her face and in her voice, although she succeeded but ill in subduing and hiding the intense excitement that kept her ever moving. Elisa wished to see him for a few minutes at least, before receiving the Professor from Bologna. He must make haste! It was evident the Marchesa wished to avoid all expressions of affection, all tears, and that she was silencing her own anguish by an heroic effort, in order that all might be quiet about the sufferer, and that there might be no confusion. She had sent the whining Zaneto away to rest. She drew away from her son-in-law, who wished to embrace her, saying: "Come, come! You must be brave! You must be strong!" precisely as if she had been addressing the most devoted of husbands.

She preceded him into the warm, dark and silent chamber, that was sanctified by suffering, and murmured with smiling tenderness: "Piero is here, dear! But only for a moment, only for a moment, you know," and then she stood aside. He entered, and in the darkness of the room, could but just distinguish the pale whiteness of the bed, the dim figure of the nursing-sister, who had risen to her feet. Then he heard a sweet but feeble voice saying: "Open the blinds a little," and while the Marchesa added: "Just a little, sister; just a very little way, you know," he crossed softly to the bedside, and saw her.

He had not been so near her for almost three years, and she now appeared to him completely transfigured. Her skin, which had been pink and white, had assumed, beneath the flush of the fever, the warm pallor of ivory; her nose had grown thinner, her eyes looked much larger, much darker and more brilliant. Never had that face been so lovely, so full of soul.

She stretched out her arms to him, took his head between her hands and drew him down to her, whispering, with her lips upon his: "Thank you! Thank you!" while he kissed her gently, almost afraid to touch her.

"Let me look at you," she said with great difficulty, so laboured was her breathing. He raised his face, and pushing his hair gently back from his forehead, she gazed and gazed at him with her great, dark, earnest eyes, which shone now with grief, now with tenderness, now with a smile full of peace.

"That will do, Elisa; that will do!" her mother whispered.

The sick woman turned her face towards the right, and pressed her lips upon her husband's arm.

"Good-bye," said she. "You will come back later, will you not? I have so much to say to you!"

Piero leaned over her and kissed her little ear that was uncovered, murmuring into it: "I am yours for ever, dearest!"

She closed her eyes in her immense joy, and answered:

"In the Lord!"

III

In the course of the day there was some improvement in her condition. The Professor from Bologna had, of necessity, tired his patient with his questions and auscultations, after which he had ordered perfect rest. His diagnosis coincided with that of the other two physicians who were attending her, while his prognosis was less discouraging. The great danger was that, upon the extinction of the fever, the patient might succumb to exhaustion, but the Professor placed great reliance on the recuperative powers of a youthful organism, as well as upon the many resources offered by science. He had delivered his opinion in the little drawing-room adjoining the invalid's bedroom, addressing most of his conversation to the person who had been presented to him as her husband. Piero shrank under his gaze, shrank from accepting this mark of preference which he did not deserve, and longed to say to him, "Speak to her mother! I am not worthy!" He even felt that he had no right to show his real emotion, and was almost ashamed of it, as if it had been hypocritical. The Professor would not leave until evening. The news of his coming had at once spread in the town, and three or four applications for consultations had reached the Asylum before his arrival. Piero wished him to see his wife again, and left the drawing-room with him that he might speak to him alone outside, with all the consuming anxiety that burnt within him, and which he felt bound to hide before the others. He besought the Professor to tell him the whole truth. The specialist assured him he had already done so, and had nothing to add to what he had just said. "We must hope! We must hope! I see you both deserve that she should recover, poor girl!" said he. Piero seized the worthy man's hands and pressed them warmly, while the Professor became more and more convinced of his own shrewdness, and of the accuracy of the moral diagnosis he had so easily improvised.

Towards four o'clock that afternoon the invalid was sleeping, watched over by her mother. In the little drawing-room Don Giuseppe was reading his breviary, and Zaneto, who was much reassured, was talking to Piero in an undertone, recalling old memories in connexion with the Asylum, memories of an aunt of his, who had been confined there for some time in her youth. Finally he brought the conversation round to the country home his wife had been preparing for their daughter; he considered the expediency of spending the autumn there, and then discussed the choice of a residence for the winter. Having thus strewn roses upon the threshold of a thorny subject, he ventured to put one foot cautiously forward.

"I have heard rumours," he said, "of certain doubts you entertain concerning the origin of your fortune, doubts tending to prevent an act of absolute proprietorship on your part. I am not saying this with any hidden purpose, I assure you. I mention the subject solely for your own good. It is a matter of which I have some knowledge, for when I was a lad, and also after I had grown to manhood, I often heard it discussed in my own house. It is a question about which there can be no question, after all! It arose from the annulling of a will for some inaccuracy of form, of I know not what nature; of date, signature or something else. Now, it may be generous to overlook an inaccuracy of form, but it is not just. Inaccuracy of form must necessarily throw a doubt upon the accuracy of the substance. As any conscientious business man . . ."

"No one of these people will ever share my views," thought Piero, and at the same time he reflected that his pious father-in-law and the sceptical Jeanne travelled by different roads to meet at last at the same selfish conclusion.

Marchesa Nene's head appeared at the door. Elisa was awake now, and wished to see Piero. As her son-in-law entered the room she left it, saying, with a smiling assumption of complacency, that Elisa had put her out. In an undertone she added: "Not too long, you know! Not too long!"

The sister had already left the room. The invalid motioned to her husband to sit down near the bed, on the side opposite the window, and, smiling, stretched out her hand. He kissed the little ivory hand that was so hot and dry, and kept it between his own.

"You are better, dear, are you not?"

She formed a kiss with her lips and murmured, as if she had not heard:

"I am so sorry now I never had a child!"

Piero protested. Why did she say such things? Did she not know she was going to recover? That the doctors were sure of it? The sick woman did not answer, but gazed at him as she stroked his hands, and presently said, in a voice so low he could hardly hear the words:

"To-morrow evening . . ."

"What about to-morrow evening?"

"Between seven and nine," she said.

Piero's heart stood still. Was her mind once more becoming clouded? He sought to call her to herself.

"Elisa!"

She looked fixedly into his face for a moment and then, letting her eyes sink to his hands, and continuing the loving movement of her own, she opened her lips. Piero, who did not understand, bent over her, and, while she still gazed seriously at his hands, and stroked them, he heard the faintly breathed words:

"To-morrow evening, between seven and nine o'clock, I shall leave you."

His blood froze in his veins; he thought of the wonderful prescience of the dying, and for the moment could not utter a word. Presently, however, he protested passionately. With her finger upon her lips she signed to him to be silent, as if he were crying out against God Himself, whose will this was. She raised her head a little higher upon the pillow, let her hand rest upon his arm, and gazed at him anxiously with supplication in her eyes. Did he not think that God had already granted her enough ?

" The Lord has been very merciful, dear, to wake me, to call me to myself, to have granted me the immense joy of having you all with me, and that saintly Don Giuseppe also, who comforts me so tenderly. Hush, dear ! Hush ! "

She paused and drew him towards her, and, her little, childish face wearing an expression of remorse, murmured, with downcast eyes :

" I was not a good wife to you—hush, dear, hush !—no, no. But indeed I did love you ! Oh, so much ! only I did not know how to show it. You must have thought me cold, and it was all dreadfully unfortunate ; I can see that now."

She threw both arms about his neck, and whispered in his ear :

" Dearest, shall we forgive each other everything, everything, everything ? Even what you do not know about me, and what I do not know about you ? "

Gently he removed the poor, thin arms from his neck, and cast himself weeping upon his knees, pressing her hand to his lips. Elisa was weeping also. At that moment the Marchesa, anxious that Piero should not remain too long, opened the door, intending to call him. She saw, and withdrew in silence. Don Giuseppe raised his eyes from his breviary, and believing she had just come from the sick-room, asked how Elisa was. She answered with her usual smile: "I do not know. I see I am not wanted." And then she also shed a few gentle tears.

Meanwhile the invalid had obliged her husband to rise, and was striving to speak again.

"You are so young, and so alone! In time . . ."

Her grief choked her, and she could not finish the sentence. At last she once more encircled his neck with her arms, and said faintly:

"You will not forget me? You will pray for me even then? Do you still pray as you once did, dear?"

Piero did not answer.

"Do you no longer pray as you once did?"

Still no answer.

"You no longer pray? Have you lost your faith?"

He could not lie to her, although he was sorely tempted.

"Forgive me!" he entreated despairingly. "Forgive me!"

Only the sufferer's laboured breathing broke the mortal silence that ensued. At last she clasped her hands, saying softly:

"Oh, Piero!"

She raised her eyes that were full of anguish, praying silently and with intense fervour from the very bottom of her heart, and offering for him all her present suffering, all she expected to suffer in the future, in the course of her own purification.

"Lord, Lord!" she thought, "do not let me die like this!" But immediately she repented of her want of resignation, and hastened to add, in her heart: "Thy holy will be done!"

Presently, in a weak voice, she called:

"Dearest!"

She asked for her handkerchief. When he had given it to her she tried to carry it to her eyes, but her hand fell back upon the sheet.

"I have not strength enough," she said, and opened her hand.

Then trembling, heart-broken, and seeking in vain for a word of comfort for her, he took the handkerchief and dried her tearful eyes. With a great effort the poor girl pronounced the words:

"Thank you. Call mamma."

* * * * *

The Scremins, Don Giuseppe Flores and Maironi had lodgings at a small inn near the Asylum. Don Giuseppe and Zaneto withdrew after the Professor's last visit. He found the fever still very high, the action of the heart weak, and the patient in a state of painful restlessness, but he assured the watchers that there was no immediate danger. The Marchesa was prepared to spend the night with the sister in her daughter's room, while Piero remained in the little drawing-room, and stretched himself upon the sofa, in the dark. He was weary and his head was heavy with sleep, but he would not leave the Asylum. Towards two o'clock he fell asleep, and dreamed a perfect chaos of absurd figures and impossible events: a dream so complicated and lengthy, that when he awoke from it he thought he must have slept a century. Half frightened, and wondering where he was, he sat up upon the sofa. A great planet was shining through the open window. He listened. Not a sound came from the sick-room; through the window floated faint, confused noises, like the quarrelling of a multitude. He went to listen;

it was the shrieking and howling of the violent patients in a distant house. Now the sound was loud, now fainter as the wind veered. The vast and gloomy landscape was as silent as the sky. There was no sign of life. Piero had slept but half an hour. He reflected with indifference that those same stars were shining above Vena, but the thought quickly left him. The innumerable eyes of the stars seemed to be acquainted with Elisa's question: "Have you lost your faith?" and to be all looking sadly at him. He himself looked fixedly at the planet, thinking, involuntarily, thoughts that were consecutive enough in themselves, but that came into his mind confused and mingled with the impressions his senses were receiving; as guests of all conditions, who have been invited to take part in a great procession previously arranged with care, and according to fixed laws of precedence, might hasten to the place of meeting mingled with a crowd of inquisitive onlookers.

"I might have said: My creed is justice!—Good God! If that thing had really happened at Vena! How horrible afterwards, to have received your kisses and embraces, you poor, suffering creature!—What a coward, what a miserable coward I have been!"

In his violent self-condemnation the hidden thoughts rose confusedly to his lips, and then once more subsided.

"What would have become of me?—Everything would have fallen. What a coward I am indeed! Nothing, nothing, nothing! The creed of justice strengthened me not at all.—It was simply chance: Bassanelli. But was it chance, after all? Jeanne is so much better than I am: so much better, in spite of her scepticism. If Jeanne only believed in God she would be all His.—And my presentiments? What has been the end of all my forebodings? Has it all been a game of hazard, a mere matter of chance?—My God! My God! What if I should lose my mind! What if I should be forced to remain in this place for ever, and end my days like those howling creatures over yonder!—Father, is your soul on that planet? —No, no, no! Father, father! I believe in God, I believe, I believe! I have always believed! Perhaps, after all, I shall go where you are, where my mother is! Elisa is surely going to join you, and perhaps, some day, I also may be with you!"

By a violent effort he checked the sobs that rose in his throat. He pressed his crossed arms to his breast, and bit his under lip, while great tears coursed silently down his face. When at last, although his chest still heaved, he was able to open his lips and wipe away his tears, he repeated Elisa's words over and over again, still rather mechanically than with deliberate intention, than with deliberate purpose, but he nevertheless experienced a sense of infinite inward relief: "In the Lord! In the Lord! In the Lord!" His sobs broke out afresh, but he stifled them and raised his face to the great, spectral planet, to the stars. Ah! Elisa's death stood written in heaven's innumerable, sad eyes. He pondered, and pondered, and slowly a vision of Praglia rose before his mind's eye; a vision of the great, deserted monastery, of the loggias, where, as a lad, he had believed he heard a mysterious call. The vision faded away, and his thoughts became enveloped in inward mists; the stars grew less bright, and he was conscious of his own bewilderment, of the damp and cold air, of the shrieks, the howls, the lamentations of those maniacs.

He started. A hand had been laid gently upon his shoulder. He turned; it was the Marchesa. She had entered the room and lighted the lamp without his being aware of her presence. Elisa wanted Don Giuseppe. There was no change in her condition. This was simply a whim; she had something to tell him, and probably feared to forget it. "What a lovely night!" the old lady added gently, but hearing the cries of the maniacs, she hastily closed the window. Since beholding Piero on his knees beside her daughter's bed, in that attitude of love and grief, she had spoken to him as the stronger to the weaker, with all possible precautions against alarming him, against afflicting him. She now bade him go and call Don Giuseppe, and then remain at the hotel and try to rest, at least for an hour or two.

"Have papa called at about six o'clock," said she, "and see that he has some milk with his coffee, for he is accustomed to take milk."

Piero kissed her hand, which she hastily withdrew, wishing to cut the interview short and return to her daughter's room. He would have fallen upon his knees at her feet, for he felt that the poor woman no longer hoped, that her composure, her gentleness, her watchful attentions, were all due to the miraculous strength of her saintly will. He went to the hotel, but returned with Don Giuseppe, who immediately entered the sick-room. The Marchesa and the sister joined Piero in the little drawing-room, and there awaited the end of the interview. The sister was casting anxiously about for a word of encouragement; the Signora had taken this or that willingly, she looked much as usual. She was wearing herself out with her continual praying, poor dear. She had done nothing but pray ever since her husband had been with her. Of course she prayed mentally, but it was plain enough that it cost her a great effort, poor creature.

The Marchesa observed that, all things considered, the night had not been bad. She would like to go to Mass in the early morning. The village church was near at hand. At what time was the first Mass? She would not go to Don Giuseppe's service, so that they might not all be absent at the same time. The first Mass was at half-past four.

No one could find anything more to say, and there ensued a silence that was painful because each felt that the interview between the invalid and Don Giuseppe seemed very long to all of them. The window, which had not been properly fastened, was blown open by a puff of wind, and once more they heard those confused shrieks. Just at that moment the old priest re-entered the room. The sister immediately hastened to resume her post, and the Marchesa could not refrain from asking: "Well, Don Giuseppe?" nor could she entirely prevent her anxious suspense from writing itself upon her poor, tired, old face. Don Giuseppe answered quietly:

"It is nothing, poor soul. A matter of piety."

"And what do you think of her?"

"Oh, there is no change. Perhaps she is, if anything, a little weaker. She wishes to receive Extreme Unction between seven and eight o'clock, because she says she always feels better at that hour. This can only do her good, so I consented at once."

"Yes," said the Marchesa softly. In her great serious eyes there shone both reverence for the sacrament and resignation. She said nothing more but for some moments stood motionless and downcast.

Then for the first time she wiped her eyes. As she did so she moved towards the bedroom door, and in her bowed shoulders and drooping head there was expressed the meek submission of an immense grief to the will of God.

Don Giuseppe left alone with Piero, looked earnestly into his face. At first Piero was unconscious of his glance; then he concluded that the priest was trying to read his thoughts. Finally, noticing a change in Don Giuseppe's expression, that had become sadder and more solemn, it flashed across his mind that he had been hiding something when he had answered the Marchesa's inquiries. He questioned him anxiously with his eyes.

"She has a presentiment that she will die to-morrow evening," Don Giuseppe said softly. "She even names the hour."

Piero dropped his eyes.

"I know," said he.

"Ah, you know. But there is something else."

Silence. It was as if the old man lacked courage to tell, and the young man to ask. At last Don Giuseppe said with an effort:

"She begs that she may be buried in Valsolda."

Piero clasped his hands in amazement.

"In Valsolda? In Valsolda?"

"In Valsolda, and for two reasons. In the first place, because she deeply regrets not having shared your affection for the spot, and feels she has also, in a way, slighted the memory of your parents who rest there; and secondly, because she says that now she feels she is united to them in praying for a great boon. Yes, yes; her words were: 'Beg Piero to let me go to them' . . ."

The old man's voice sank to a whisper, a faint breath:

"... 'like a daughter.'"

Piero, who was sobbing, folded him in a warm embrace.

"I believe ... the boon ..." But he could not go on.

They remained thus folded in each other's arms for some time. At last the young man raised his head, and murmured:

"And my poor mother-in-law? What will she say? Will it not be a great grief to her?"

"I reminded your wife of that, but she answered: 'Oh, mamma is a saint.' And now hush, or they will hear us!"

* * * * *

The bells of the little church near by are ringing the *Ave Maria* at daybreak. The sick woman asks what time it is, and wishes to see the sky. She tells her mother she has been asleep and has dreamed that she was in Paradise with Piero, her father and mother, and, she adds, smiling at the nun, with Sister Eletta also. Mamma and Sister Eletta shone very brightly, she says, but Piero far outshone them both! Her mother exclaims: "Nonsense, nonsense!" with calm good-nature. The invalid tells her to prepare herself, for the time will soon come, and she herself is so happy! The mother is silent; the bells ring on; Sister Eletta opens the blinds a little way. For the last time the sufferer sees the white light of dawn spread in the eastern sky.

IV

Don Giuseppe said Mass at about half-past five. In after days the parish priest used to declare that he had never seen any one officiate with such fervour in his voice, with such piety in his face, with sighs so deep and full of longing as that old priest, who was a stranger to the place. " He appeared to be seeing Christ in a vision ! " said he. " After Mass, when I had helped him to unrobe, I left him."

Absorbed in the prayers of thanksgiving Don Giuseppe did not notice when some one entered the sacristy. Upon rising from the kneeling-stool he was confounded with astonishment and dismay ; before him stood Piero, his face aflame with anxiety and supplication, his clasped hands trembling so violently that the priest immediately thought : " She is dead ! " and his terrified eyes proclaimed his fear. " No, no ! I must speak to you ! " Piero panted. Don Giuseppe dismissed the acolyte who was in attendance, Piero flung himself upon the kneeling-stool, and, covering his eyes with one hand, motioned repeatedly with the other to a battered arm chair that stood near for the use of a confessor.

After a moment's hesitation Don Giuseppe obeyed, half reluctantly, half willingly, and eagerly awaited an explantion.

" I can speak nowhere else, nowhere else ! " sobbed Piero, both hands hiding his face. " I was already much shaken . . . when you talked to me in the night . . . about the great boon . . . ! But afterwards . . . afterwards ! "

He could not go on. Don Giuseppe stroked his hair very gently.

"Wait, wait! Weep your fill and then you will be calmer."

But neither could Piero remain silent, and, little by little, his voice became more firm.

"Afterwards . . . as soon as you had left me to come here, I suddenly became restless, and was conscious of a sense of anxious expectancy of I know not what, of an intense inward longing, of a desire to weep, without being able to do so. Then all at once, and for an instant, for an instant only, I saw behind my brow or within my breast, I know not which, the words, 'Why dost thou resist me?'—I was frightened at first, but presently I said to myself:—'It is a coincidence, it is involuntary reminiscence, that is all.'—Upon her return from Mass my mother-in-law had left her prayer-book upon the table in the drawing-room. I opened it. It was the *Imitation of Christ*. My eyes fell upon the beginning of the fourth book, where Christ's words are set down: '*Venite ad me omnes qui laboratis et onerati estis et ego reficiam vos.*'"

Under his breath Don Giuseppe uttered an exclamation of astonishment. Piero questioned him eagerly. Nothing, nothing, Don Giuseppe had nothing to tell him. The young man resumed.

"I began to tremble, to tremble violently, as if I had heard the Lord Himself calling me. I came directly to the church. On the way I felt I was walking through an atmosphere laden with God's presence. As my foot touched the threshold of the church, and I saw you at the altar, I was swayed, all at once, by many different emotions. The faith of my childhood awoke within me; my separation from God, my repeated refusals to listen to His calls, now caused me acute pain; and my heart was filled with loving gratitude for all the patient kindness He has heaped upon me.

"The Mass had reached the Sanctus. I fell upon my knees. At the moment of the consecration I covered my eyes with my hands and saw, yes, I really saw, written in the palms of my hands, those five words, those very words, which, as a lad, in moments of mystic fervour, when I fancied I was about to die, I longed to see appear upon the wall at the foot of my bed: MAGISTER ADEST ET VOCAT TE. I saw them large and white against a black background. Then, towards the end of the Mass while I was still upon my knees with my eyes covered, this terrible thing happened to me: I had a vision which was like a flash and lasted only an instant, of my life in the future and of my death! If I close my eyes I see it still. Oh, tell me, tell me, Don Giuseppe! I thirst to give my whole being to God, but may I indeed believe that this vision has come to me from Him, that it points out His will? For if I believe this, it contains an explicit command. For the present I must make complete renunciation, and later, when God shall see fit, I must assume a grave responsibility, I must publicly fulfil a personal and extraordinary mission in the Church. I may believe in my vision, may I not?"

"Your first duty is to compose your soul," Don Giuseppe replied. "You must return thanks to the Lord who has once more called you to Him, and pray, pray with the utmost fervour, that He may enlighten you, that He may reveal His will to you, with as much certainty, at least, as our nature is capable of feeling, our nature which is so finite in its communications with infinite knowledge! For, at times, certain human presumptions find a means of mingling with the pious impulses of our soul, and induce us to mistake for facts of a supernatural order, facts which, on the contrary, are the outcome of an abnormal condition of our spirit and body, and which—although they are indeed the work of God, because, of course, everything is God's work, accomplished by His own methods and for His own inscrutable purposes—cannot be intended as direct revelations of His will to us. Only think. . . ."

Here Don Giuseppe hesitated somewhat embarrassed, and his voice grew more tender:

" . . . are we not all beseeching the Lord to grant your Elisa's recovery? And think how this grace, be it granted or denied, must affect your life!"

"Oh, yes, yes! Good God! That is true, but, nevertheless, there is the vision!"

"Yes, yes, indeed!" Don Giuseppe exclaimed. "And the Lord has it in His power to confirm it. Meanwhile there are acts which He certainly expects you to perform. He expects you to pay your debt to Him, be it great or small . . ."

"Great, great, very great!" the young man cried despairingly.

" . . . to know and love Him as you once did, better than you once did. He may have some other great gift in reserve for you. We can only hope and pray! And now shall we not hasten to console that poor sufferer? Let us hasten to tell her that her prayers have been answered."

Piero raised one of the old man's reluctant hands to his lips.

"You go, you go!" he answered. "You yourself must tell her, at once!"

At this point the acolyte came in, sent by the parish priest to remind Don Giuseppe that the hour fixed for the administration of the Holy Oil to the sick woman was fast approaching. Piero left the sacristy with the feeling that Don Giuseppe was inclined to attribute his visions to intense nervous excitement, and to consider them vain apparitions. In spite of himself this was painful to him. While Don Giuseppe had been laying his prudent considerations before him he himself had doubted. Then his soul had gradually and slowly composed itself into a peace full of certitude, as troubled waters, gradually sinking into repose once more, hold fixed in themselves the reflexions of surrounding objects.

V

The sacrament had been administered, and life was ebbing fast. The invalid could no longer speak, and human hope had left the silent room with bowed head, while celestial hope had entered, solemn and sweet, announcing, with finger to lip, the approach of an angel, and filling all things with peace and humble reverence. The faces of the watchers were calm and grave; they had ceased to question the doctors, whose expression also betrayed their respect for the great mystery. Don Giuseppe, seated beside the bed, was reading pious words; no other voice was heard; no one dared to weep. In the presence of the dying woman, of the hidden mystery that was being accomplished on that bed, listening to the solemn ring of the pious words, sat the mother, grand in her isolation. They had attempted to prepare her, telling her vaguely of her daughter's presentiment, but without stating the hour; but she, as if already aware of this, or unwilling to hear it, had never once turned upon her informant those great, black eyes of hers, so grave and despairing, that were fixed upon the divine will. When Don Giuseppe had recited the rosary in the little drawing-room, she had stood with hands clasped upon the back of a chair, and had made all the responses. But after that she had not spoken again, nor had she betrayed her grief even by a gesture. For the first time in her life she now sat quietly in the same place, as the slow, interminable hours dragged on, and the doctors and nurses, glancing at her from time to time as at something awe-inspiring, avoided passing near her, and, when obliged to do so, bowed their heads.

The invalid could no longer speak, but she still understood everything. She had understood the sweet and joyous words Don Giuseppe had whispered to her immediately after the administration of the sacrament; she had smiled and sought Piero with her eyes, and had seen him standing straight and resolute there before her; twice or thrice the poor lips had tried to speak, but in vain; then her eyes had expressed to him all she felt, all her joy, her tenderness, and even her humble respect. She had raised her eyes to heaven, and then let them drop again; once more the poor lips had tried in vain to speak. At that moment Don Giuseppe, who was watching Piero, had seen his face become transfigured, not with grief, but with a spiritual energy that was superhuman, luminous and mute.

The hours dragged on slow and interminable. At intervals death paused an instant in his onward march, and the physicians strove painfully and hopelessly to hold him at bay; but Piero asserted his authority, and begged them to allow the struggling spirit to depart in peace. Many letters and telegrams arrived, containing inquiries and words of hope, but neither Piero nor the Marchesa would examine them, and they were laid aside. At five o'clock the Scremins' agent came from the station, ostensibly to make inquiries, but really because he felt he would be wanted should the Signora pass away. He asked whether he should remain. The watchers shuddered and avoided each other's glance, and no one answered. The man was allowed to withdraw without a word, and it was the Director who ordered him to remain, to wait at the inn. It struck six o'clock. Those who knew, thought:

"Perhaps it may come in an hour, or perhaps in two or even three, but not later."

The Director begged the family to partake of some food which he had had prepared in his own apartments. Don Giuseppe and the Marchese had something brought to the little drawing-room, but neither Piero nor the Marchesa would leave the sick-room. It struck seven o'clock. Two hours more perhaps.

Through the open windows they could see the burning mountain-tops go out one by one, while the darkness crept ever higher. The bells of the neighbouring church and of the distant city rang out the evening *Ave Maria*, and then all was still. Star after star shone forth in the east. Once more the bell of the little church began to peal. This time it was the passing bell.

It was ten minutes to nine. Don Giuseppe began to read the prayers for the dying, in a clear voice, stopping often to press the crucifix to the pale lips of the sufferer, who no longer heard, no longer saw. All her dear ones and Sister Eletta were praying upon their knees when the angel of God entered at last. A silence as of the grave fell upon the watchers, and they heard the step of a passer-by, and singing in the distant fields. The doctor bent over the quiet face, that was whiter than the pillow upon which it rested. A smile illumined it, and the lips were slightly parted. He glanced silently at Don Giuseppe, who, in his turn, bent over her with clasped hands, and when he once more raised his head, it was to say in the hushed and reverent voice he would have used at the altar:

"This is not death. It is the light of eternal life."

* * * * *

Not a single flower lost its brief hour of life for her. Her mother would not tolerate them upon the funeral couch.

VI

Towards midnight, in a small room at the inn, and by the light of a tallow candle, Piero and Don Giuseppe sat talking of the dead woman, and of the spiritual treasure which had lain hidden within her.

"She had her mother's nature in that respect," said Piero.

Then Don Giuseppe sighed.

He sat still and silent for some minutes as if considering this admirable mother, and then drawing a case from his pocket, said she had entrusted him with something for Piero.

Some time before, when that "I suffer," so full of anguish, and of hope, had come from the Asylum, the Marchesa had secretly commissioned Don Giuseppe to have a few appropriate words engraved upon a gold medal, which Elisa, in the event of her recovery, would give to her husband in memory of the merciful dispensation of Providence. Upon leaving home in obedience to the Director's summons, she had taken the medal with her as a good omen, and now it was

Don Giuseppe's duty to consign it to Piero as a precious relic. On one side the medal bore engraved around the edge, the words of Christ:

VENITE AD ME OMNES QUI LABORATIS ET ONERATI
ESTIS ET EGO REFICIAM VOS.

Upon the other face were the words:

REFECIT NOS
ME REDDIDIT TIBI
ET TE MIHI.

Piero took the medal, and, upon reading the words of Christ, uttered an exclamation of surprise as Don Giuseppe had done in the little church, when Piero had told him that chance had placed those same words before his eyes. He studied them for some time, and then embraced the venerable old man, and begged him to have something more added, something he himself had said.

"I should like it to read thus," he concluded:

REFECIT NOS
ME REDDIDIT TIBI
ET TE MIHI
IN LUMINE VITAE.

Now it was Don Giuseppe's turn to throw his arm affectionately round the young man's neck.

"And does mamma know whither she is to be carried?" Piero asked, after a long silence.

"Yes, she knows."

"When do you think my parents-in-law will leave?"

"To-morrow morning at five. We are going together."

"Oh, Don Giuseppe, Don Giuseppe!" the young man cried. "I need you!"

"I can stay until eleven o'clock, or even until four, if you wish," said the priest.

"No, no! You must come to Valsolda with me. With me and with *her!* I need you to help me begin what God has ordered me to do."

"You need me?" Don Giuseppe hesitated.

"I no longer entertain the slightest doubt," said Piero, believing his hesitation meant that the priest had doubts concerning his vision and his vocation.

"But I am good for nothing! I have no strength, no head, no . . ."

Don Giuseppe paused. The hand of the Lord seemed stretched out above this young man. Might the most broken, the most miserable dare to say to such a Hand: "With me Thou wilt accomplish nought"? His protests ended in a few mumbled words, broken like his resistance. Meanwhile neither he nor Piero had been conscious of an oft repeated knocking. The person who had knocked, receiving no answer, finally opened the door. The two men rose to their feet; the Marchesa entered, bent and sombre, her bonnet on, and her veil covering her face. How was this? Were they going to leave at once? Yes, she and her husband had decided, for several reasons, not to go by train, but to take a carriage. Thus they could start at once, and reach home before sunrise. Having told them this in a grave voice, she sat down, and lapsed into silence, her breath coming hard. Don Giuseppe, feeling that his presence at that moment was inopportune, softly left the room.

Piero knelt at his mother-in-law's feet, and taking her hand, pressed it to his lips; her breathing more laboured than ever, she placed her other hand upon his head, thus bestowing upon him her mute pardon, her mute blessing, and a mute caress in her dead daughter's name. All that these two had to say to each other was said thus, said at great length, without a word, without a movement. The old lady could not have borne to speak in any other way.

Finally, in order to rid herself of the fear that he would speak, would mention the past, the hated subject, she advised him to take some rest.

"You have the journey before you," she said.

She meant the journey to Valsolda with the body, the journey which must be postponed for at least twenty-four hours longer. But Piero did not move. He also seemed to be expecting a word from her, or perhaps he himself had something to say. The Marchesa tried to withdraw her hand which he was pressing between his own, but perceiving that he clung to it, she supposed he was overcome by his grief, and said tenderly that the Lord had surely acted for the best.

But Piero would not set her hand free. She waited a moment, and then said hesitatingly, that it must be time for Zaneto and herself to start.

But still Piero would not let go her hand. The Marchesa reflected that to the young man she was as a part of his Elisa, and that it was for this reason it was so bitterly hard for him to tear himself away from her at present. She inquired when he would return, but immediately, and without confessing even to herself the dread that moved her to do so, added that she proposed going to visit him in Valsolda. "To visit you *both*," she said at first, but quickly corrected her pitiful mistake: "To visit *you!*" She mentioned a distant date in November, thus admitting that his absence might be of even longer duration.

"One word, mamma: I do not know when we shall meet again."

"What do you mean?"

Piero rose to his feet, and resting his hands gently upon her shoulders, whispered softly to her.

She did not understand at once, and asked some questions. Still she could not understand, and again she questioned him. Her great, black eyes were filled with astonishment, with despair, and at last with tears. A few more questions, a few, short, whispered questions; again he spoke to her, again whispered in her ear, and then the tears rolled down her wrinkled face.

One question more:

"Where?"

He was silent.

Again:

"Have you told Don Giuseppe?"

"Yes."

They heard the jangling of bells and the slow trot of horses in the distance, then the noise of wheels and of wooden shoes sounded on the paving stones, and presently the trotting and the jangling stopped directly beneath the window. Silence.

"Then," said the Marchesa, rising, "shall I never see you again?"

"Only the Lord knows."

Oh, to her also, to her also now, Piero was as a part of her Elisa! She wiped the tears from her eyes, but her handkerchief shook in her hand, poor creature! And the embrace in which she folded her son-in-law was so close that Piero was deeply moved by this mark of affection so unusual in her. They heard steps upon the stairs. It was the Marchese coming in search of his wife. She once more resumed her iron control over herself, and remembering her duty towards her husband, as she had always understood it, murmured:

"Don't tell papa, poor papa!"

Zaneto entered the room.

VII

Upon returning to his own room Don Giuseppe was greatly astonished to find the Director of the Asylum waiting for him there. The physician said he had something of a most delicate and secret nature to communicate to him. Don Giuseppe had no idea what this communication might be.

"I speak to you," the Director began, "because of the high opinion I have formed of you during the last two days, and also because I really had not the courage to speak to the Scremins at such a time; and, indeed, it would perhaps have been unwise to do so. Tell me, Don Giuseppe, what do you think of Maironi?"

"I?"

Don Giuseppe, much astonished, was casting about in his mind for an explanation of such a question.

"I hardly know what to answer," he said at last. "I think he has felt the blow most deeply; more deeply, perhaps, than might have been expected."

"Is that all?"

Was it possible the Director had heard of the vision? No, that was out of the question.

"That is all," said he.

The physician sighed, and Don Giuseppe asked what he himself thought of Piero.

"I am of opinion that you must get that man away from here as soon as possible, and never leave him to himself," said he.

"Why?"

Don Giuseppe had not yet grasped his meaning.

"Because I believe his mental condition to be such as not to exclude the possibility—I am going to speak quite openly—that he might, one day or another, come here, and fill the place his wife has left vacant."

Don Giuseppe uttered an exclamation of amazement and protest, but the Director disregarded it.

"Listen to me," said he. "I have long been interested in Piero Maironi, and the nature of my profession has prompted me to study him carefully whenever he has been here. I will not go so far as to say he is a neurasthenic, but, setting aside scientific terms, I can assure you he is, to say the least, of a highly nervous temperament. When he was in the habit of coming here frequently, I noted certain religious tendencies in him—for he gave proof of his fervour on several occasions in our little chapel here—noted his intolerance of anything approaching to indelicacy in conversation; and certain strange acts of his also, such as his repeated refusal to visit that part of the Asylum where the female patients are confined; and I came to the conclusion that he was, by nature, a pious, austere man, but one unfit for celibacy; whose necessary separation from his wife caused him great suffering, such suffering as to seriously affect his nervous system. Then, having heard a rumour of an attachment—pardon me, I speak as a medical man—I reflected that perhaps this evil might, after all, prove a blessing in disguise. But something happened here to-day which has startled me. This morning, between ten and half-past—perhaps you did not notice his absence—Maironi entered our little chapel, which he believed was empty, but, as a matter of fact, there was a servant in the sacristy. Now this man saw him making the strangest gestures, and heard him groaning aloud, while he gazed at the crucifix with the expression of one who is a victim of hallucinations. You will tell me that the saints of old indulged in trances of this sort. I have all due respect for the saints, and I will not even question St. Theresa; but do you really believe there are any saints nowadays? I myself greatly doubt it. Nowadays we have hysteria and religious manias. In my opinion his actions this morning were the result of a religious mania. It is quite possible that this mania may always remain within certain limits set by time and place, but it is also quite possible that it may increase. And now you know what I had to communicate to you. I felt it was my duty to speak."

"Alas!" cried Don Giuseppe sadly, with bowed head, like one who, in so grave a question, has not, nor can possibly have, the certainty he could have wished to possess, but who inclines to a different opinion from the one which has caused him such anxiety. "Thank you," said he.

The Director withdrew.

VIII

When she had finished the recitation of the rosary with her husband, had advised him to go to sleep if he could, and had arranged her shawl carefully upon his knees, the poor old Marchesa leaned back in one corner of the closed carriage and continued her prayers. She prayed for Elisa, although she was sure her child was in Paradise; she prayed for Piero also, prayed that he might make no mistake, that he might be led to ponder well upon a resolve that, to her, seemed almost madness. And she thought and thought of this incredible thing, determining, at last, to write to Don Giuseppe about it. Her mind was already busy with plans for the future, plans both for her son-in-law and for her husband. What if she should die and leave Zaneto all alone? In imagination she installed him in her villa, installed Piero in the little apartment she had prepared for Elisa, mapped out their mode of life, making and unmaking endless arrangements, spinning eternally the fine threads of intricate designs, which the night wind quickly swept away, the night wind aided by the even, monotonous trot of the horses, by the rhythmic jangling of their bells, that also seemed to be travelling a road that was endless, endless and weary.

IX

Shortly before midnight on that same night, Jeanne left the drawing-room of Villa Cerri almost by stealth. The Maestro and a very clever violinist were playing a whirling *allegro*, which poured through the open windows towards the woods and the fields of the surrounding hills. She went out into the cold darkness, and leaned against the railing which crowns the semicircular bastion in front of the villa. She did not know the reason of Piero's departure, but she knew he had not written to her since, and she knew also that she no longer wished to love him, but that she was unable to love any one else in the world, unable even to think of any one else. She leaned forward over the yawning precipice and wept. She felt it was all over, felt that that last flash of passion had passed in vain through his senses, rather than through his heart. She told herself that she might possibly regain his affection by feigning a conversion; she could die for him, but she could not lie to him. From the black chasm at her feet she raised her eyes slowly along the face of the mountain opposite, until they reached the sky. Above a band of mist stretched the open, peaceful heavens, with the innumerable stars. As a child she had believed in God. What a sweet refuge He would be for her now! But how could she believe in God? How could beings so unstable, so short-lived, so miserable have conceived such a mighty Absolute? How could God be other than the desire for what we ourselves lack? And if God really did exist, simply in the form of that absolute justice about which Maironi had become fanatical, should this justice not be apparent in everything which does not depend upon human will, in everything which depends upon justice alone? But where, then, was this justice? Why should she herself suffer so much? Was she responsible for this love of hers?

The music ceased. Composing herself as best she could, she returned to the drawing-room, inquiring carelessly:

"What were you playing?"

Her brother was scandalized! Was it possible she had not recognized the first *allegro* of the *Kreutzersonate?*

"They call it an *allegro*," he added. "I call it a mingling of the agony of two souls, the souls of the piano and of the violin; an agony which must of necessity accompany the birth of something very grand!"

"It seems to me," Signora Cerri observed timidly, addressing Jeanne, "that it is often thus in real life. Don't you think I am right?"

Jeanne was silent.

CHAPTER VIII

WITHOUT TRACE

I

THAT frail body, once the dwelling of the spirit that had ascended to Life, had rested for three days in the little white cemetery above the mirror of the lake, among the vines, the olives and the laurels of this gentle land. The night that was fast closing in promised to be stormy. Gusts of wind, alternating with deep hushes that fell upon all things, whistled across the lake, along the banks, and through the oleanders and rose-bushes of the Maironi garden, forcing their branches to bend towards the waves. The wind rustled in the umbrella-pine above the bench where Piero and Don Giuseppe sat conversing, and played with the slim, black branches of the cypresses, ranged along the wall in the highest part of the kitchen-garden. The light of the moon shone through a sheet of milky clouds, which stretched across from the softly outlined profiles of Galbiga and Bisgnago, to the wild cliffs of Picco di Cressogno and the smooth brow of Boglia; and from time to time the veiled form of the orb itself would appear for a moment, whitening the oleanders, which were in full bloom, the foliage, the roses, the gravel of the path, the lofty flank of the little church of Oria, and the rustic and ancient campanile, towering above the garden. It was a stormy night, both in the sky and on earth, and the conversation under the pine tree was often interrupted by silences that were full of expectancy, or ruffled by lingering breaths of the Spirit, or illumined by some hidden thing, which now appeared, now vanished. At times Don Giuseppe seemed to be crushed beneath a great weight, which darkened his very soul; at times he became transfigured, and raised his radiant brow; then his eyes shone, and his gestures became eloquent. As to Piero, the seriousness of his bearing never varied. The fire of his ardent eyes seemed to be burning deep down within him, while his words had a dignity and a firmness which were new to them. It was Don Giuseppe who broke the silence whenever the hush fell upon surrounding nature, and silence was once more renewed between them when the wind filled all nature with noise. It was usually a soliloquy that fell from his lips, a painful returning of his thoughts to the difficulties of a trust he had now irrevocably undertaken. Five hours before, Piero had signed an act before a notary at Porlezza, consigning all his possessions to Don Giuseppe, and it was understood between them that the priest should take into partnership certain persons Piero had pointed out, and with their aid found a sort of co-operative agricultural association, which should be capable of extension and, within certain limits, accessible to all who might wish to join. In this association the soil, considered as an instrument of production, should end by becoming common property, and the statutes should be of a religious nature; thus the Christian aim of the association would absorb and dominate its financial aim. Should Don Giuseppe's counsellors not approve of the scheme, or should it prove a failure, the entire property was to be divided into lots, which lots were to be entrusted to certain carefully selected families of peasants, who should cultivate the land on trial for a time, after which period it should become their own property. Don Giuseppe had suggested this last clause; without it he could never have been induced to accept the endowment, and the responsibility of an experiment in which he had little faith. If Piero had not succeeded in convincing him of the wisdom of creating an association which, as far as possible, should be open to all, and in which the soil should be essentially common capital, he had succeeded in convincing him that his intellect was wonderfully strong and firm, and this by the vigour of his reasoning and the composure of his bearing. He had given proof of calm discrimination when Don Giuseppe had expressed a scruple that by thus disposing of moneys which had been relinquished in order that they might be devoted to certain purposes, he should be unjustly maintaining a semblance of proprietorship. Don Giuseppe's conscience was not easy on this point.

"Pardon me," the old priest said suddenly. "Pardon me if my question is indiscreet. Was this idea part of your vision?"

After that solemn and painful day the vision had never been mentioned between them. Don Giuseppe had not ventured to speak of it, nor had Piero ever alluded to it.

"No," said he. "This idea is the fruit of long mental labour, and has now gathered strength within me through the Christian sentiment, because I honestly believe the appropriation of the soil for the benefit of the few to be most unjust, and I furthermore believe that the foundation of such well-ordered groups as these would contribute to the healing of the ills from which society suffers. But what is of most importance to me is that I do not fling away my fortune at random, but rather bestow it wisely upon the needy, according to a strict idea of justice. A month ago I was resolved to relinquish all, without any religious sentiment, but simply for the sake of justice in one particular case. Of this you are already aware. I now see that this was not reasonable, and that I am doing much better in relinquishing everything for the sake of a justice that is general. The vision refers only to my life after my renunciation."

"I think," Don Giuseppe observed timidly, "that you alluded to two distinct parts of your vision."

"Yes," said Piero, "but in the second part . . ."

They heard the dip of oars and the sound of voices. A boat was approaching, and passed slowly beneath the wall of the kitchen garden. When all was silent once more Piero threw his arm round Don Giuseppe's neck.

"Forgive me," said he. "I had rather not speak of it. I mean of my vision. I feel unworthy to do so."

"One word more. Do you still believe it was of a supernatural nature?"

"It now seems to me that it was of a supernatural nature in so far as it tallied with certain voices which, at one time, I used to hear at intervals, and also as regards the order for me to lead a life of poverty, of penitence and of prayer. I also believe it to be of a supernatural nature when it points out to me my future public mission. As regards the preannouncement of certain events, I have formed no opinion. I will accept at God's hands whatever He may see fit to send. I have, however, felt it my duty to write out a description of my vision. It is already enclosed in a sealed packet which you will take care of, for it is not to be opened until after my death."

Don Giuseppe smiled, and made a gesture which meant that he would certainly die first.

"In any case," Piero went on, "you must choose some responsible person, who will open it eventually."

The shadows that the mention of death always spreads, the shadows of the solemn and tragic future they were picturing to themselves, enveloped the two men seated upon the bench. Don Giuseppe was thinking of certain details Piero had communicated to him immediately after the vision, and comparing them with the words he had just spoken. What mission in the Church could this young man be called upon to fulfil? His profound intellect suggested to him many different suppositions, and he recalled many longings, full of doubt, which he himself had cherished long ago, longings for a Catholic reform in the Church. These thoughts he had never clearly expressed to any one, perhaps he had never even clearly conceived them, such were his veneration and humility. A whistling wind tore along the shore, a gust swept the banks, a swift, black shadow spread over the lake, while the lofty pine creaked in response to this tumult. At the same moment the inquisitive moon looked forth, its white light frosting the oleanders in full bloom, the foliage and the roses, the gravel of the path, the lofty flank of the church, and the rustic campanile towering above the garden. In Don Giuseppe's profound thoughts, disposed as he was to intimate communion with nature as well as to intimate communion with God, the drama of the wind, the waves and the moon, and the drama of this soul, once darkened by passion, now mysteriously illumined by the Spirit, were mingled and blended into one.

Some one entered the kitchen garden. It was the caretaker, who had come to say that the keys of the cemetery, which his master had asked for, had been brought to the house, and that he himself had brought a postal packet for Piero from San Mamette.

On their way towards the house they passed the old rose bush that bore the little pink roses, and Piero paused.

"I will set it down in writing as well," said he, "but I wish to beg you personally to see that the sisters take the greatest care of the oleanders, which are still the very ones my father planted, and also of the roses, and especially of the orange tree and the mandarin in the little garden."

The tiny villa in which Franco and Luisa had loved and suffered so deeply, in which the heroic virtue and the generous resignation of Uncle Piero had wrought so much good, the spot where little Missipipì had perished, was destined to receive the convalescent sisters of an order which Don Giuseppe would choose, and to contain a school where the girls of the commune of Albogasio might receive instruction in needlework and housework.

"You can keep yourself informed about that," Don Giuseppe suggested. The young man made no answer, but bent his head and placed his lips upon a rose.

* * * * *

"Ah, Don Giuseppe!" said he, as they left the kitchen garden, "I can indeed say to the Lord: *quaerens me sedisti lassus!* How many times did He call me, and I still persevered in my determination to lose myself! Even after your last, dear letter! It was doubtless in order that I might acknowledge everything as coming from Him, and nothing, absolutely nothing, as coming from myself."

II

The packet that had come by post was in the hall. Piero carried it to the light and read upon the stamp the words:

Vena di Fonte Alta.

He laid it down, and taking the keys of the cemetery, told Don Giuseppe he was going out for a few minutes. Should he find him still up, on his return? Don Giuseppe was tired and wished to write a letter before going to bed. The mention of the letter reminded him to inquire what Piero's plans were. Don Giuseppe himself would like to leave very soon, and wished to announce the day of his arrival in this letter.

"Do just as you like," said Piero. "Write whatever you think best."

His discreet old friend did not venture to question him more closely.

All alone Piero turned towards the cemetery. The wind and the lake were still. Long lines of cypresses, groups of thickly branching olives, and the brows of the lofty mountains showed black against the pale, even whiteness of a thin sheet of cloud. The path and the grassy slope on the left, the little fields on the right, lying beside the sleeping waters, looked grey in the veiled light of the moon. Piero met no living soul on the way. Upon the steps of the cemetery, near the gate, a ragged old man was kneeling, who rose at Piero's approach, and having scanned his face, said timidly, with a half-idiotic smile: "I was just saying a prayer or two for my dead. You must be the son of poor *Sciora Luisa.* How kind your mother used to be to me! She was a good woman, that she was indeed!"

Piero gave the man a generous alms, and he presently limped away, mumbling: "Just think of that now! Just think of that!"

Then Piero opened the gate, removed his hat, and entered the cemetery.

On the left, almost opposite the gate, against the wall on the hillside, were four white marble stones.

Upon the first were carved the words:

HERE RESTS
THE SWEET LITTLE GARMENT THAT CLOTHED
MARIA MAIRONI.

The second stone bore the words:

INGEGNERE PIETRO RIBERA.
A GREAT AND LOYAL HEART
IS AT REST.

Death had so arranged his visits that the sweet child and the old man, who had loved to hold her in his arms and sing "Proud shade of the river" to her, should still sleep side by side.

Upon the third stone were the words:

TO FRANCO
IN GOD,
HIS LUISA.

Upon the fourth:

TO
LUISA MAIRONI RIGEY.
PIERO MAIRONI,
WHO KNEW NOT THE MOTHER'S HIDDEN FACE,
RAISED THIS STONE
WITH A SIGH.
1882.

In the luminous night the black letters of the epitaphs could be easily read. To the left of the last stone the freshly upturned soil marked the spot where poor Elisa lay at rest.

Piero knelt upon the grass and bowed his head. His lips did not move, nor did a single muscle of his body. He might have been turned to stone while praying reverently, in the attitude of one who feels ghostly hands hovering above his head in the act of benediction. When at last he raised his eyes the moon had stealthily dropped to its setting; the holy field and the walls had grown dark; he could no longer read the epitaphs, and the hands that had blessed him had been drawn upwards once more to their mysterious dwelling-place.

III

Don Giuseppe lingered in contemplation of the lake, of the shadows, of the night, of a distant light up among the crags of San Salvatore. He was thinking how greatly man had changed in Valsolda since the good old days, and how slight had been the change in things. Upon Piero's return he stretched out his arms, and gave the young man's hands a silent pressure, which meant: "I know where you have been."

"You have not yet opened your postal packet," said he.

The caretaker offered to do this, and Piero consented. Then, lighting a candle, he conducted Don Giuseppe to the neighbouring alcove-room, and told him that he had no doubt the packet was from "her." It probably contained flowers for the cemetery. He, however, would not take them there; he had not even allowed himself to pluck a rose for his father when they had passed the bushes in the kitchen garden just now. But he wished to speak to Don Giuseppe about "her."

"I believe she is to return to Villa Diedo about the beginning of September," said he. "I should like you to see her then."

The caretaker came in with the open packet. It was indeed a box of cut flowers. A simple visiting card accompanied them:

CARLO DESSALLE.

But Jeanne's soul was among them, and the broken, dying blossoms, the sweet-smelling cyclamens from the woods of Vena, the rhododendrons from Rio Freddo, the edelweiss from Picco Astore, spoke of her alone, of her love, her grief, her timid offering and her discreet silence.

Piero read the card and then looked thoughtfully at the flowers.

"It is her brother's card," said he, after a short pause. "So you can present yourself at Villa Diedo and thank him in my name. But try to see her also. It would be better to see her alone. She herself will probably wish to see you alone. Tell her I am leaving my friends, but that I hope to meet them once more in the true life, and that, meanwhile, I beg them to pardon me for any harm I may have done them, in any way whatsoever. Tell her also that when I shall have left the world I shall pray with especial fervour for a soul that is afflicted with scepticism, a soul that would become sublime should it give to the Creator the love it has given to a creature. Have I ever told you, Don Giuseppe, that I owe it to her alone if my mental transgression did not become a transgression in deed ? ”

Don Giuseppe, silent and with bowed head, was thinking not of the difficult interview with Signora Dessalle, but of the mystery with which Piero surrounded his plans for the future. Which religious order did he intend to join ? Would he, indeed, join any order, or would he choose to remain free to frame his life as he pleased ? How would he frame it, and when ? At last both rose and left the room together. While they were saying good-night the caretaker told Don Giuseppe that the parish priest had sent to ask at what time he wished to say Mass the next morning. Don Giuseppe glanced at Piero as if to ascertain his wishes, but Piero was silent. Then he himself answered :

“ At seven o’clock.”

The blossoms from the distant mountains were left in the alcove-room, sad and neglected, like the woman who had secretly breathed her deep grief upon them. Thus many years before, in that same room, had Luisa breathed her deep grief upon other broken and dying flowers.

IV

Before going to bed Don Giuseppe wrote Marchesa Nene the following letter :

"Most revered Signora Marchesa,—

We have placed your darling in that field of rest to which her pious and gentle wishes pointed. It was a solemn moment. The cemetery itself, the steps that lead to it, and the narrow lane below it were crowded with silent, sorrowing onlookers. I spoke to her the Lord has chosen, as best I could, both in the name of those she has preceded in death, and of those to whom she has ascended like a devoted daughter. I saw the people shedding tears of pity for this young woman whom they had never known, but who had chosen their humble churchyard for her last resting-place. They wept also at the affectionate memory all here still cherish for those who are near her beneath the sod, as well as in Heaven. The cemetery is a beautiful spot, surrounded by olives and grape-vines and not far from the shores of the lake. The clear sky, the shining water, the summer breeze, the gay rustling of the branches, all seemed to bid us dry our tears, assuring us that our dear one was basking in the ineffable joy of the Divine Vision.

I received your letter this morning. I assure you I myself was greatly dismayed when your son-in-law informed me of his resolve to withdraw from the world and lead a life of absolute poverty and penitence, and I performed what I believed to be my duty when I advised him to reflect, to pray, to wait patiently for a confirmation of the Divine Will. I am willing to confess that, in consideration of his talents, his culture, his social position, and this unexpected return to the Christian faith which God has brought about in such a mysterious manner, I could have wished him to take an active part in public life, especially as he could have been of such great service to this unhappy country of ours. However, I soon saw that Signor Piero was not to be shaken in his resolve, and at present I should very much doubt the wisdom of seeking to influence him. He is most impatient to enter upon his new life, and I have allowed him to entrust his property to me, to be disposed of as he has already appointed. The act of transfer was signed this afternoon before a local notary, and to-morrow Signor Piero will give me those instructions in writing, which he has already imparted to me by word of mouth. Perhaps, at the same time, he may tell me something about the date of his departure from this place, and about the order he intends to join. As a matter of fact I have no right to assert that he intends to join any religious order. But be that as it may, the arrangements Signor Piero has made, certain vague allusions to the future he has uttered, and which I will repeat to you when we meet, and, above all, his great grief, and the wonderful nature of the events which have led to this change in him, inspire me with hope, most revered Signora Marchesa, that your affliction may bear such fruit that, seeing it, you will rise up and praise God, as you have hitherto praised Him in all His dealings with you, without seeing, and through faith alone. I am filled with hope that it may bear such fruit as to dispel certain doubts, certain suspicions and fears concerning your son-in-law's religious fervour which have reached my ears, and which are not entirely devoid of foundation if judged according to the wisdom of this world. *A fructibus eorum cognoscetis eos.*

May God continue to bless you with holy thoughts, and prolong the days among us of one who reflects so much of His light and of His peace.

To-morrow I shall say Mass for the repose of your beloved Elisa's soul.

Your most devoted
Don Giuseppe Flores.

V

The next morning, before issuing from the sacristy to say Mass, Don Giuseppe inquired if Signor Maironi were already in the church, and upon hearing that he was not, waited some time, ready robed. At last, although Piero had not yet arrived, the priest was obliged to celebrate. Upon his return to the sacristy he found the caretaker there. The man could hardly wait for Don Giuseppe to finish the prayers of thanksgiving before begging him, in a trembling voice and with an anxious face, to come home without delay. What had happened? The caretaker did not reply until he had closed the outer door of the villa behind them. Then his only answer was an outburst of weeping.

"Good Heavens! What is the matter?" cried Don Giuseppe. "Speak, man!"

But the poor fellow could not speak; his sobs prevented any explanation.

"Read that!" he said at last, with difficulty, and offered the priest a note.

Don Giuseppe glanced at it, and at once saw what had happened. He exhibited no astonishment, and bade the caretaker accompany him to the room Piero had occupied.

It was a small room on the top floor, with two windows, one looking southwards, above the roof of the hall, towards Monte Bisgnago; the other looking westwards, above the little hanging-garden, and across the long and narrow mirror of water that stretches from Gandria to San Salvatore. Both windows were open; the peace of the lake and of the mountains pervaded the empty room. A bag and an overcoat of Piero's were upon the chest of drawers, his walking-stick and umbrella stood in one corner, and Don Giuseppe's first exclamation was one of surprise.

"His things are all here!"

But on the writing-desk they found a letter with the following superscription:

For you, Don Giuseppe, and may God reward you for all you have done for me.

The bed had not been slept in, and Don Giuseppe asked the caretaker if he had heard any one go downstairs or open the outer door in the night. No, he had heard nothing. In fact at half-past seven the outer door had still been locked. But at half-past six Don Giuseppe had found the garden gate wide open. Piero must have gone that way. Don Giuseppe read his letter. It contained only the instructions Piero had promised him, the confirmation of what he had already told him, and a sealed envelope, bearing the words: *To be opened after Piero Maironi's death.* The note to the caretaker contained only an affectionate farewell, a few words of praise and of thanks, and the order to look upon Don Giuseppe Flores as his master. The caretaker, ignorant of all the circumstances, and utterly unable to account for Maironi's disappearance, feared his grief at the loss of his wife had driven him to do something desperate, and immediately began to talk of making inquiries at Porlezza and at Lugano.

"No, no!" said Don Giuseppe. "Do not fear for him. The Lord Himself is leading him. If it be God's will we shall see him again. Meanwhile he wishes to hide himself from the world. We must respect this wish of his."

For the moment the faithful servant was silent, but later he could not resist the desire to seek for some trace of his master. But not the faintest trace could he discover. No one had met him, no one had seen him, no one had heard his steps. If the day shall ever dawn upon which will be revealed to us the secret journeyings of the vanished man, and the reason of all this mystery be made clear to us, only He who called him to fight His battles knows.

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